

IZUSHIRO  
ILLUST RURIA MIYUKI

# THE GREATEST MAGICMASTER'S

# RETIREMENT PLAN

4





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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

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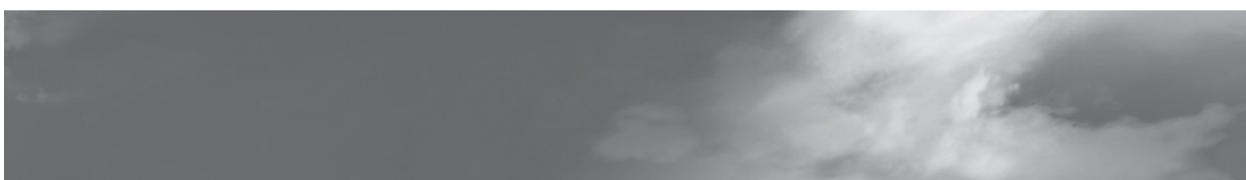
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# Sixteenth Chapter

## Yearning

She had a dream since she was young.

That someday, the hero of a fairy tale would one day appear and take her as his bride.

Heroes of fairy tales always journeyed in a straight line, unwavering and unbending, just honestly adhering to their path. Their actions weren't always intended to save someone, but the result would be that they'd save the lives of many.

The girl's ideal was the kind of prince that was straight out of one of these fantasy stories.

Thinking back on it now, she realized that was in large part due to her father's influence. When she was young, he'd always read so many colorful bedtime stories to her, so in a sense it was only the natural result.

That's why the girl always sought to refine herself, to become a better person, so that when the prince arrived one day—he would turn her way. She thought that one day a perfect man like her father would surely appear.

That girl's name was Felinella Socalent. She was the daughter of the rising noble family that was taking the nation of Alpha by storm.

Her father's personality being what it was, he was never strict on manners or etiquette befitting of a noble, nor of a woman's accomplishments. But Felinella didn't take advantage of this, instead taking the initiative to gain those qualities, most likely due to her ideal from when she was young. Nothing gave her more energy for driving herself forward than that.

She believed that when she met the man who embodied her ideals, she would need to be worthy of him. Along with her strong will, she had the kind of personality where she took what she did seriously, which eventually turned her into her ideal self.

She picked up many kinds of refined skills such as music and painting. And due to her father's influence, Felinella took an interest in the ways of magic.

But most of all, she questioned how attractive a woman would be if she always had to be protected. If she was somebody as weak as that—would her ideal prince find her among the many women in the world?

With that thought running through her head, Felinella gained expertise in magic through untiring effort.

Several years passed, as that belief drove her forward.

At the age of 11, ideals and expectations had filled her heart, and she had already been struggling to differentiate between dreams and reality. Everything she'd done so far wasn't useless, but as expected, everyone in noble society was far distant from her ideals.

They'd all had the values of nobility instilled in them since birth, and were pretty similar. Despite their status and riches, she believed that none of them could become the hero of her story. They were just puppets loyally fulfilling their parents' wishes. And everything they spoke of was superficial.

Her growing disappointment forced her to eventually accept the reality that, in the end, fairy tales were only beautiful because they were fantasies. Reality was far more raw and sinister.

At some point she accepted that as truth, and came to believe that disappointment and the faint ache in her chest was just something that came with being a noble.

So when Vizaist told her a new story, the childhood dream she'd almost given up on made a recovery.

Her father told of a boy, one year younger than her, who had joined his squad. His name was Alus Reigin.

Every tale she heard of the boy made her heart flutter, to the point that she would beg to hear more every day. If there weren't any new stories, she'd ask him to tell an old one.

His achievements and his way of life seemed like they came straight out of a book, despite the harshness of reality, and he had a hard-to-resist attraction for her, though Vizaist was probably embellishing the tales to some degree.

Even despite that, Felinella wanted to know more about Alus. What did he like, and what did he hate? What bothered him, and what did he enjoy?

Before long, an image formed in her mind that she colored in herself, and she began to hold him in high regard inside her girlish heart. Hearing how he'd saved her daring father countless times, as well as the many stories that couldn't be made public, that boy who wasn't that different from her in age had become her beacon of hope.

But as a result, Felinella never asked Vizaist for anything other than more stories about Alus. She also worried if she was a woman who was worthy of him the way she was now. She'd worked to refine herself all this time, but still felt like it wasn't enough.

When she thought that he might not even bother with her, she began to refine her magic skills even more, and a few years later she enrolled at the Second Magical Institute.

Finally, after much time had passed, she asked Vizaist, "Father... please let me serve in your squad. I'll do anything, even chores, as long as it brings me a little closer to the top of the Magicmasters..."

Her request truly troubled Vizaist. If he'd just been in charge of a normal reconnaissance squad it wouldn't be a problem, but the missions he dealt with at the time were primarily inside Alpha.

It wasn't so much that it was dangerous, as it was shady work. And there were many missions that he doubted her still-young mind could handle.

However, in the end, Vizaist buckled. Felinella had overpowered him with passion. She went on to wholeheartedly do her best for the day when

she would meet Alus. After all, she wanted to be of use to him, even if it was through the shadows.

Even after Alus left Vizaist's squad, she and Vizaist were always there to do the preliminary investigations for any missions Alus received. And Felinella was able to keep up her efforts because she could always feel him at her side.

That was probably when Felinella developed an attraction for Alus as a person, rather than as an ideal in her head. While he didn't embody the ideals she had held as a child, she grew more interested in him the more she learned of him. She wanted to know everything there was to know about him.

This likely wasn't something that would have happened just because she heard stories from her father. If she hadn't taken an interest in the boy called Alus, she probably would've continued chasing her dream prince.

Whenever Vizaist spoke about him, he would always add in some unnecessary details. He probably did it unconsciously, but it was his personal opinion of Alus. And so, Felinella's image of Alus got fleshed out.

This Alus was far from a perfect human being. If anything, he had a horribly fragile side to him. He was an imperfect Magicmaster who held his pain in, maintaining his isolated position at the top through abnormal strength. She even imagined herself hearing the scream of his soul, something he would never say out loud.

At some point, Felinella came to understand how the world worked, and she realized the unreasonable environment he was in. And when Vizaist spoke of him in a heavy tone, she shed more than a few tears. The story of the Magicmaster fighting on his own reminded her of the many bad endings to stories she'd heard. That's why Felinella truly wanted to be closer to him.

She was aware it was stupid to yearn for someone she hadn't even met yet, but those were her true feelings. In fact, she began to tell herself that her feelings were closer to the real thing *because* she hadn't met him in person yet, and still felt this way.

She saw a photo of him once in the middle of a mission. Her feelings remained unchanged. They truly were real.

Alus' face was expressionless, but he had an inexplicable gloom hanging over him like he was carrying isolation and sorrow, doing what he could for the nation. To Felinella, it looked like the expression of someone who didn't know of any happiness in the world.

While she wanted to free him from his chains, while doing her missions she came to understand that magic was the only thing that could defeat Fiends and how valuable Magicmasters were.

That was just how dirty the world was. That was just how much the world demanded sacrifice.

Ever since then, when Felinella had it rough, she would tell herself that Alus had it rougher.



That's when Alus Reigin's name stopped being brought up during missions. Even when she asked her father, all she found out was that he was alive, but that all else was unknown.

She didn't have the composure to seek to meet him, and she was anxious that he might be in a difficult situation—and that she might not yet be worthy of him.

Waiting for him wasn't acceptable, but Alus' whereabouts remained unknown.

Even in her anxiety, she kept up her efforts, and reached the realm of the Triple Digits as a student.

As the first year ended, she was called to the principal's office. She'd been chosen as the representative to speak at the new students' welcome ceremony. It was of course an honor, and she immediately accepted. As she did, she happened to see the profiles of the newly enrolled students.

It must have been a coincidence. But among the profiles, she saw Alus Reigin's name.

Her heart skipped a beat, as she felt fate at work.

After that, she practiced her greeting endlessly and refined it. She couldn't afford to embarrass herself. She'd do what she could to get him to remember her.

Felinella spent more time practicing her few minutes-long speech than she did preparing for any of her tests.

However...

The spotlight shone down on her, and she brought the microphone to her mouth. Shortly after the speech began, she ran her eyes across all the new students to find him.

She searched, but... her cheerful voice gradually lowered in tone, and slight disappointment cast a shadow over her expression.

He wasn't there.

It wasn't like she hadn't been able to find him. Instead, she saw an empty seat that she was convinced was his. Once she realized this, her voice faltered for an instant.

In the end, Felinella carried out her duty, as was expected of her. She still had all the time in the world, she told herself. She didn't know why, but she believed that if he was at the Institute, he must have retired from the military. But she hadn't heard anything about it from her father, so she wasn't sure.

Suddenly, she recalled something he'd said before: the Governor-General now had the authority to give Alus orders. Vizaist had sounded strangely ecstatic when he talked about it.

He'd returned home late one night, dead drunk, proudly speaking of Alus as if he were speaking about himself. "Alus has finally become a Single Digit."

Taking that into consideration, it was likely that her father didn't know Alus was enrolled at the Institute. Felinella would eventually have to tell him, but she could wait a little longer... at least until she could meet Alus.

With that thought in mind, that time came one day as she stood in front of the girl's dorm.

\* \* \*

Morning came.

Felinella Socalent opened her eyes in her dorm room. She'd woken up naturally. Nothing had disturbed her sleep, like sunlight acting as an alarm. Her ingrained habits had automatically woken her up.

She rose from bed with a yawn, stretching as usual. These motions were enough to fully awaken her... usually.

Instead, she was sitting on the bed as if trying to avoid the sunlight peeking through the curtains, hanging her head a little.







Perhaps she was still stuck in a dream... however, the remnants of her feelings were too vivid for a dream.

She recalled her overwhelming feelings and how they'd developed. It felt like the feelings that had been lurking deep within her heart had finally shown up on the surface. Perhaps that was why her heart began beating like an alarm.

She'd ended up blurting it out. It had slipped out of her under the moonlight, on the night of that incident. It was the first time she'd made it clear that she had feelings for him.

Two days had passed since then, but it wasn't until now that she realized just what she'd said. It was an expression of determination that she didn't need to be ashamed of, but Felinella now knew how much it could shake her heart.

Up until now, she'd been confessed to several times... but now that she was the one confessing, she learned how anxious and hesitant one could be while doing it. Having learned how it felt, Felinella now wanted to commend the courage of the boys that had confessed to her.

She couldn't take back what she said. She'd have to accept that. Felinella put her anguish aside and, seeking to re-energize herself, headed for the showers.

That's when her license that she'd left on the table rang out to signal a call.

Felinella cursed her inability to ignore it, and turned around. The ringtone sounded a few times... she would confirm the caller, and if it was a friend, she'd just call back later.

"...!! Mr. Alus?!"

*Now I've done it*, she thought to herself, feeling a headache coming on.

It had already rung several times. Knowing who she was dealing with, it wouldn't be strange for him to hang up at any moment; she couldn't keep him waiting. With a sense of panic, she pushed the license up against her ear. "Is that you, Mr. Alus?"

Her confirmation, after picking up the call, was completely meaningless, as she'd already made sure who it was.

"Ah, no, excuse me. It's Felinella Socalent..."

Her mind ran around in circles. It wasn't until after she said it that she realized how pointless it sounded. This was a license to license call, so it was obvious Alus knew it was her on the other end.

The next moment her face turned red with embarrassment. In her confusion, her incoherent speech headed further into the deep end.

"First off, why don't you calm down," a young man's low voice said through the license.

When she heard him, Felinella felt her heart skip a beat. After taking a deep breath, she feigned composure, but felt her voice sounded as embarrassed as she feared she looked.

Putting her hand on her chest to calm herself, Felinella spoke again. "... O-Oh, I just woke up, so please don't mind me. Yes. I am doing just great."

As they continued to talk, her heart began to settle down, and her words became more fluent. The hand on her chest moved to her lips, as if to hide the smile blooming on her face. "Yes, I understand. Then, I will be waiting for you at the entrance gate."

From that point on, until Alus hung up, Felinella kept the license pressed against her ear in bliss.

After a warm sigh, she hurried off towards the showers.

\* \* \*

For the diligent students of the Second Magical Institute, a summer vacation was unnecessary. And for now, peace had returned to the campus grounds.

While they were passionate students, they had no way of knowing what had happened behind the scenes, after a mad scientist's attack on the Institute.

Due to the incident with Godma Barhong, Alus ended up losing half his summer vacation. However, that wasn't solely because of the clean-up after the Element Factor Separation Project, but also due to the reports he'd had to write about the involvement of not only Loki but Tesfia, as well as various other reports. That had wound up taking two whole days. His work had been no less diligent than that of any of the other students.

Loki, having helped with the large number of reports, had completely run out of steam. Alus had told her that there was no need for her to help, but she'd firmly insisted. Thanks to her, he'd managed to cut down on the amount of time he'd needed to spend on it, but he still had one last thing left to do.

"Right then, I guess I should wrap this up too." Of course, this didn't mean writing more reports, but something completely different.

Alus sent the written reports to the Governor-General, with a single line: "No reply necessary."

By now, Loki was fast asleep. Alus had accidentally dropped a cup as he was pouring coffee and, despite the loud crash, Loki showed no signs of running in. Her efforts during the incident, as well as the exhaustion from helping Alus, had finally caught up to her and she was now recovering.

Since noon arrived, and Loki still hadn't woken up, Alus wrote a note for her and left the laboratory. In his mind, all he wanted to do was let her get some well-earned rest.

"I have been awaiting you, Mr. Alus," Felinella greeted Alus with a refreshing and alluring smile.

He'd called her in the morning. Perhaps because they were still on vacation, she was wearing casual clothing. She wore a vest over a bright white shirt and a pleated skirt. She'd come dressed up; unlike her uniform, this gave her a neat and clean, more adult look.



Alus' destination was the girls' dorm. A male student couldn't enter without an appointment, so he'd made one with her. In fact, if he didn't, stepping inside this impregnable garden would be a handful.

It wasn't a big deal if one followed the proper procedures, but the fortress-like dorm looked like the kind of place where men were strictly forbidden. The paperwork to get in was strict and incredibly detailed, and applied to any male, even other Institute students.

The entrance had a keypad that required the use of a license, and without the proper procedures in place the only thing a man would receive when he placed his license there would be a loud error noise, rejecting his entry.

The truth was that Alus had experienced the dorm's strict security before. That's why he'd made sure to get in touch with Felinella ahead of time. Normally male students were rejected at the gate, but with the dorm supervisor's permission, he would have no problem getting in. Alus didn't become the No. 1 Magicmaster by repeating old mistakes.

He pulled out his license so he could open the gate. As he did, Felinella tried to say something, but Alus went on ahead.

"Sorry, did I keep you waiting?" Alus raised his hand and tried to enter, when an unpleasant sound rang out.

It was the intruder alarm going off. At the same time, barrier arms closed in on both sides of him and one struck his abdomen.

Twitching slightly, Alus tilted his head downward to look at his feet. There he saw shackles firmly attached to his ankles, not budging an inch.

While he'd trained for live combat, this was too much of a surprise attack.

Alus had a sullen look on his face, as Felinella hurried over and apologized repeatedly. "I'm so sorry for this, Mr. Alus! I should have told you sooner—even if you contact us ahead of time, permission for the system can only be granted from the inside. The doorkeeper happens to be taking a break right now."

"Yeah, i-it's fine. This is n-nothing. I was being careless too." This was the place that had the strictest checks in the Institute. But even Alus had underestimated it.

With quick motions, Felinella brought out what appeared to be a master key, and held it against the gate's keypad. A green light turned on, letting them know that entry was granted. At the same time, the shackles on Alus' legs released, and the barrier arms retreated as if they'd never been there to begin with.

Felinella apologized once again, her head hanging low.

With the security system disarming itself so quickly, there wasn't time for Alus to garner unwanted attention from the dorm residents. He looked around anyway, just in case, and let out a sigh before he finally stepped inside the forbidden area.

"Sorry for calling you in the morning. Did I wake you up?" It had only been a short call, but Alus could tell that Felinella sounded like she'd only just woken up. Though by now, she was all cleaned up and well dressed. He felt a little bad as he gazed at her face.

"Not at all. I was planning on waking up anyway... I'm the kind of person who can't stand unhealthy living."

*How very like a noble*, Alus thought. Or perhaps he should praise her for being a model student.

Inside the dorm were a few female students. The reason they weren't glaring at the male student in their dorm was because Felinella stood next to him. Of course, Alus couldn't help but receive his fair share of strange looks, despite that.

He obviously had a clear reason for coming all the way to the girls' dorm. It was because he needed to meet with Alice right now.

As Alus stood before the girls' door, a cutesy tone rang out. After a short while, a girl's voice could be heard, yawning, and the door opened. "*Yawn*. Yes, who is... it?!"

The person peeking through the door wasn't Alice, but Tesfia. Tesfia's face twitched at the unexpected sight of a man outside her door in the girls' dorm.

She was nobility like Felinella, but still, she looked sloppy after waking up, with her unkempt hair sticking out in places like a sore thumb. Incidentally, it was already past noon.

Alus' rude stare then fell on her negligee, which reached to her knees. It wasn't exactly transparent, but the fabric was thin, revealing the lines of her body. At the very least, the sight could be called suggestive.

"Wha—huh?! No way! Stop! Don't loook!!"

Tesfia, realizing how improper her appearance was, didn't do something modest like covering herself up. Instead, she tried the brute force method of knocking Alus out. A fist swung at full force approached Alus' face.

Perhaps taking it head on was something a man should do. Following up with an apology for his unannounced visit would be even more gentlemanly. "—!!"

However, Alus didn't subscribe to that kind of policy one bit. He easily caught her fist in his hand. "Shut it, I'm not here for you today, so bring Alice out," he said, still holding onto her hand, preventing her from moving.

Unable to take the shame anymore, Tesfia began wriggling her body, holding her negligee in one hand, while tightly closing her legs together.

"Mr. Alus..."

At Felinella's soft urging, Alus realized he was still holding onto her hand and let go, and Tesfia responded by promptly slamming the door shut.

Soon loud noises came from behind the door.

"Fia, try not to break anything. I'm the one they're going to get angry at." After calling out to the other side of the door, Felinella let out an

exasperated sigh. "I hope you can come to understand a woman's heart a little more, too, Mr. Alus," she said, looking down at her own clothing.

*It looks like this is going to be a struggle.* She skillfully hid her not-quite exasperation, not-quite complaining about Alus' blockheadedness, giving him a gentle look instead.

"Is that so? I'll be more careful next time." Alus seemed to have reconsidered his behavior for once, and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

Giving him a sidelong glance, Felinella's lips curled up as she thought of something. *But that kind of negligee might be good.* It seemed she was making preparations for enticing him.

After 30 minutes of waiting... "How long are you planning on making me wait?" Alus said grumpily, as the door finally opened and the room's two residents stepped out.

"You're the one who came here unannounced," Tesfia retorted. She and Alice were in their usual outfits, standing side by side.

Fortunately, Alus had Felinella with him, so they'd spent the time waiting by talking with each other.

"Three minutes is more than enough time to get dressed."

"Girls have a lot of circumstances they need to attend to, okay!"

Felinella rubbed her temple as she watched the two argue, but it wasn't as if she couldn't understand where Tesfia was coming from. After Alus had called her, she'd hurried but still had taken quite a bit of time to get ready.

"I don't care about those circumstances. Anyways, I called for Alice, not you."

"Alice and I come as a set. Besides, there's no way I'd send her off alone after you've acted like a pervert before."

That time had been a misunderstanding, so Alus could easily refute it. But no matter how logical his explanations were, if this commotion grew bigger, onlookers would gather and rumors would spread.

With nothing else he could do, Alus signaled for rescue with his eyes, leaving the rest to the dorm supervisor.

"Fia, I'm the one who brought Mr. Alus here. And even if this is your own room, as a lady you should always strive to be dressed in a fashion that won't bring your family shame. Besides, you are to blame for opening the door without confirming who it was."

"B... but..."

"But what?"

As Felinella furrowed her brows, Tesfia flinched and fell silent.

That prim attitude was exactly how Alus imagined a noble lady should act like. For now, the noisy one had piped down.

"Alright, Alice—let's go."

"Huh? Where?" Perhaps she'd slept in like Tesfia, but Alice, who'd been sleepily looking on, suddenly shot her eyes wide open.

Even Tesfia had a surprised look on her face. In fact, Felinella also seemed a bit startled to hear they were going somewhere.

"Why don't you tell us what you're here for first? And why is it just Alice... What about me?" Tesfia held onto Alice's arm, with the size difference looking like a child throwing a tantrum. Although that might not be completely inaccurate...

"That's because it doesn't have anything to do with you. In fact, you're not needed at all. It's not something I need to hide, but talking about it out here would be bad."

"Then, would you like to come in...?" Alice nervously suggested.

Tesfia interrupted her. "Alice, are you serious?!"

"Well, if we don't do it, we're not going to get anywhere," Alice said, using perfectly sound reasoning.

Seeing that Tesfia still hesitated, Felinella decided to use even more logic against her. "Fia, you're the one who brought up talking about Alus' business for being here. Or do you have something in there that you'd rather not show?"

"I don't... I don't, but... Can it wait a minute—!" Tesfia broke out in a cold sweat, then slammed the door shut on Alus and the others once more.

And again—a noisy racket sounded from inside the room.

"My, my," Felinella said, with a small wry smile. Alice had a similar expression as she called out, "That's why I told you to keep things clean."

"We're not getting anywhere like this. Right," Alus muttered, as he made up his mind. He'd already waited 30 minutes. He wasn't going to wait anymore. "We're coming in."

"Al, wait!"

Ignoring the surprised Alice's attempt to stop him, Alus opened the door.

"Haha..." Felinella could only laugh, a little bitterly, as she braced herself for what would come next.

As Alus stepped in, he saw the room for himself. The room with white walls was rather spacious even for two people. The girly accessories and colors here and there stood out... and when Alus saw a massive silhouette, he was taken aback for a moment.

At closer look, it was a giant stuffed animal. It had some frayed spots, but was in good condition overall. Either it had seen a lot of use, or it was just old.

It was clear that the room's residents had a very girly, cute side. Though that stuffed animal probably belonged to Alice.

"It's still not... What! Don't come in!"

"I don't mind. I'd already assumed that you lived a sloppy life."

"Shut it, you!!"

With Alus having entered the room, Felinella and Alice shrugged, and stepped in.

In front of them, Tesfia shouted, breathing heavily, "I can't believe you!"

"I'm pressed for time here, and you've already made me wait 30 minutes," Alus replied in a composed manner.

"Oh, Fia," Alice sighed, then shrugged.

"Give it up, Fia. You brought this on yourself."

"You too, Ms. Feli?" Tesfia finally seemed to surrender, as she hung her head low. There was no point in resisting any further.

The room Alus entered had the unique smell of a girl's room. It was a sweet, somehow familiar smell. "So you guys are the reason why there's been a sweet smell in my laboratory."

"Ack, don't smell it! Don't inhale!" Tesfia launched herself at Alus, trying to stop him from breathing.

Alus easily caught her arms. "Don't be ridiculous."

"It is a nice smell, isn't it?" Felinella took in the smell as well.

That said, nothing good would come from continuing on with this silly kind of exchange. Especially with the redhead around.

Eventually, three of them sat down around a table. However—

"Hey, what kind of treatment is this?"

Indeed, there were only three chairs at the table. And as Alus had continued his arguing with Tesfia, he was the last to take a seat. As such, no chairs were left, leaving him standing. Though it wasn't like he was fuming as much as he sounded. Still, considering what had transpired up to now, he had a hard time accepting this.

Well, the others aside from Alus all sat down around the same time, so it wasn't like Tesfia was being malicious.

"Oh fine, Al..." Tesfia, who'd managed to calm down, began to get up from her chair. After her head cooled, she realized that having him wait 30 minutes had maybe been a bit too much. She acted reluctant, but in reality, she felt a little guilty about it all.

However, the moment Tesfia started to stand up—

"Here, Mr. Alus, we can share half of my chair." Felinella slid over to the side of the chair, inviting Alus to sit. She beat Tesfia to the punch, and smiled at him to hide the embarrassment she was feeling. Sharing a chair was a bit much, and they'd end up having to press against each other. So perhaps it was only natural for a teenage girl to feel some resistance to it.

Either way, Alus felt like it would only exhaust him. "I'm fine, so you can just sit there." Alus refused... or tried to, but Felinella insisted on the matter. And ultimately, they ended up wasting even more time.

In the end, Alus pushed his will through, and when he checked the time he found he no longer had any leeway left. "Now, I'm going to have Alice head over to the military headquarters with me to meet the Governor-General. I already have an appointment. I told you, didn't I? The Governor-General and I will support you," Alus said, referring to when he'd discovered Alice's attribute-less state during his examination of her.

It was an unintended consequence of the Element Factor Separation Project, and Alus made the suggestion to keep Alice from becoming the subject of any further strange research or investigations.

"Ah!" Alice let out a little yelp, as she remembered.

"The Governor-General? Why would Alice be meeting someone so important?"

"Even if we tell you, you'll have to keep it confidential. But if you want to know, then ask Alice." Alus was starting to feel a headache come on. But since any leaks would negatively affect Alice, Tesfia probably wouldn't let anything slip.

"Can I hear it, too?" Felinella timidly asked.

"I don't mind." Alus figured Felinella was already working with the military, so she would understand the severity of the situation. Either way, she was smart, so she definitely wouldn't cause any trouble.

After Alice briefly explained the matter, Tesfia immediately spoke up. "In that case, I'm going too!"

"I wouldn't be as nervous if Fia came along..."

It was a bit of a pain to Alus, but he thought leaving Tesfia behind would be a problem, too. He could already imagine her pestering him with questions without end. "Since this concerns Alice, then you can come as long as she's fine with it... but please try not to stand out."

Seeing Tesfia clench her fist in joy, Alus started feeling anxious about all of this. "What about you, Feli? If she's coming, I might as well take you all."

"I've heard the important details, so I will refrain from joining you. I also happen to have some other work left to do after this as well."

"I see." Then it couldn't be helped. Alus nodded. They'd ended up wasting a lot of time unnecessarily, but he had a hunch about what her 'work' might entail.

Considering her resolute behavior, it was clear Felinella took her job seriously. They still didn't know exactly who was behind Godma. And Vizaist's squad, in charge of information gathering, was likely still on a mission to find out more.

"Right, Feli. Once that's done, bring a report over to me."

From Felinella's point of view, it wasn't really something serious enough to be called clean-up. At most she saw herself as just assisting Vizaist. But she couldn't help but smile at Alus making a request of her. "Yes!"

Nodding at her answer, Alus checked the time. "We better go. I'd never hear the end of it if we're late."

"What! Already? ...I can't go dressed like this, right?"

It was then that Tesfia checked her outfit, and asked this in an anxious tone. She'd already changed out of her negligee into something that wouldn't stand out unless she went somewhere truly upper-class. They were normal clothes that wouldn't cause a problem in most places, but she worried whether it was something that was okay to wear in front of the Governor-General.

It wasn't strange for nobility like Tesfia to mind her appearance, but Alus was also wearing something very casual as well. The blackish monotone outfit he wore was provided by the military, and it was very tasteless in terms of fashion. "No, you should be fine like that. If you don't



like it, then change into your uniform," he told her, and indicated the same to Alice as well. If this took even more time, then the Governor-General might grumble some more.

Alus and the two girls traveled through three locations using the Circle Port, then headed from the middle-class district towards the edge of the human-controlled domain in Alpha.

The closer they got to the defensive line, the heavier the military presence. That much was clear from the uniforms and AWRs the military personnel carried.

There were cities out here too, but their appearance was very different from the ones in the middle-class district.

One of these cities was Folen, an important location in Alpha. It was also referred to as the second defensive line. If the first defensive line were to be broken somehow, the defense personnel would fall back to Folen, and stand by for further orders. Because of that, there was a military command in the center of the city.

The walls around the city had been fortified in case of a Fiend attack, but everyone knew it was only for show.

Babel's barrier was far more sturdy, and had kept the Fiends out for decades, but that also meant that humanity's survival relied solely on that barrier's existence.

Folen would be one of the first cities put in danger should the barrier fall, so plenty of escape and evacuation routes had been constructed. But even if something were to happen, only a minority of the population would likely escape.

Many of the people here were stubborn and stuck to their way of life. They were ready to die fighting for their city.

The population's attitude was reflected in the city's atmosphere. Folen was always lively. Not only was the city scene vibrant and full of life, but there were also many shops that were focused on Magicmasters, showing off the magical technologies of the industrial cities.

Even many Institute students came here to purchase tools or materials. The Institute had a large inventory of such things as well, but the young couldn't be blamed for wanting to personalize their own equipment.

Of course, there were also workshops that specialized in AWRs, so practically all the senior students who wanted their own personal AWR visited Folen at least once.

"Hey, I said we don't have time!"

"But..." said Alice.

"I can't take my eyes off of them," Tesfia said.

In this city... two people were being unreasonable. Since Alus was the one leading them, the unreasonable children were of course Alice and Tesfia. As this was their first time here, they stopped in front of all of the display windows to gawk at the wares.

And every time they did—Alus told them to hurry up, but this was the umpteenth time... because of this, they weren't making any progress. Seeing the two with their eyes sparkling with the spirit of curiosity, and their inability to turn away from the precious goods, Alus couldn't help but worry for the future.

"What did you guys even come here for? I'll leave you behind."

"Wait a minute!" Tesfia exclaimed.

Alice said, "Can't we take it a little slower?"

When Alus walked away, fed up with them, the two hurriedly rushed after him. They still looked around them with the same interest as before, as they continued on.

It was at this point that Alus lost out to their persistence. While he resigned himself, he also decided to get something to help cheer Loki up. She'd helped him with the reports as well, so as her partner, he wanted to thank her in some way.

That said, their business still came first. "Well, we can take some time on the way back."

"Really?! ...Thank you." With a slight blush, Alice gave her thanks excitedly.

... Though the other one didn't even seem to hear what he said. Well, what could you do...

Most of the Institute's students enrolled to study magic properly. So they didn't get a lot of chances to visit Folen. "There's a lot you can learn here, so it wouldn't be a waste to come for a visit," Alus said.

Even if one didn't do any shopping, this was where the latest news circulated about. This country developed a new technology; that new product was of high quality; and so on. This was a city that was rife with the latest talk.

Alus frequented Folen often when he was off-duty... that said, this was the first time he'd led others around it.

Exasperatingly enough, just getting down the main street took a lot of effort. The two girls were reacting to every single shop they passed by, making them perfect targets for the shopkeepers trying to attract customers.

Alus had to lead them away by the hand, as they looked ready to succumb to temptation. Losing Tesfia to a store visit wouldn't hurt, but Alice had to come with him.

One could select multiple locations from a transfer gate, but when traveling through Folen, one had to cross through the city. To access the transfer gate required a license issued by Alpha, and the transfer was effected by reading the military base's location through the license.

Alus had chosen to go through Folen to see the sights for the first time in a while, and it need not be said that he regretted this decision.

As they finally neared the Circle Port, they came across a wall that was even higher than the outer walls, with forked spears on top. It was a quasi-barrier, commonly referred to as the Second Babel.

Babel's barrier was the result of countless researchers coming together. This was an imitation of that barrier.

That said, it could only repel weaker Fiends, and its range was extremely short. So it wasn't very practical despite its high cost, making mass production of it pointless.

The Tower of Babel that had protected humanity for so long was now something they could no longer reproduce. There were rumors that only the rulers of the nations knew its secrets, but some claimed that not even they knew everything. It was clearly a construct of some sort, but the principal theories and the mechanisms involved were wrapped in mystery.

Some even saw Babel as an object of worship; but nonetheless, its construction and workings were more than likely all lost technology.

Having now reached the transfer gate, Tesfia and Alice looked behind them with regret. To Magicmasters, this city was definitely a treasure trove.

Alus had said there was a lot of knowledge to be gained here, but as students the most they'd manage would be perusing the AWRs. Unless they were looking to become engineers, they probably wouldn't make any discoveries.

But Alus figured they probably weren't even looking to learn anything. From what he'd heard, women were usually the kind that were attracted to gems and loved to shop. And these two were likely no exceptions to that. So despite his consideration, he once again realized that he'd made a poor decision.

He stifled an urge to complain, and nodded for the girls to move on. "We're leaving." He put out his license, started the transfer, and their surroundings began to change.

"...!" "...!"

Alus was used to this, but Alice and Tesfia were not. He could understand their reaction as a grand building suddenly appeared before them.

The two were startled, and silently looked at the changes around them, not moving at first due to a sense of pressure.

The building was at least three times the size of the Institute's main building. The shape was unique, a curved cube. It looked like the building was leaning. This vast base worthy of being called the military headquarters had a presence similar to a mountain range.

There were several watchposts around the entrance, and Alus once more held up his license at what appeared to be a checkpoint. "I'll leave you behind!"

The two girls were still in awe when Alus shouted this, but finally they began to follow him.

Despite the quizzical looks he received, he continued walking without any concern. On the other hand, many knew who Alus was, and some even stopped to salute him.

Strictly speaking, Magicmasters on the frontlines didn't have a military rank. If one had to give them a rank, their rank as Magicmasters served that purpose.

Single Digit Magicmasters, who were vastly stronger than the rest, were referred to as Singles. Ranks in the tens were referred to as Doubles.

Those in the hundreds were Triples; those in the thousands were Quadruples; the ones in the ten-thousands were Quintuples; and the ones in the hundred-thousands were Sextuplets. The last three were abbreviated as Quads, Quins and Sixes.

These were all official designations, but Quins and Sixes were no different from rank-and-file soldiers, so nobody used those.

While there were no ranks—Singles were recognized as being on the same level as generals, Doubles as field officers, and Triples being company officers. But they didn't have the authority to give orders, so no one really differentiated between the ranks.

Of course, a chain of command was established for each mission so the unit could function as an organization; and for that reason, there were many that respected a Magicmaster's rank in the military.

Moreover, due to their position in companies, Triples also served as actual company officers, so while there was a difference between their ranks as military officers and Magicmasters, it was a differentiation based on the occasion.

So seeing Alus command such respect, Tesfia looked at him with refreshed interest. "You're pretty popular."

"It's not popularity. They're only respecting the rank, unlike you."

Recalling how she'd acted in the past, Tesfia felt a tingling pain in her chest. She couldn't brush off his comment like she'd usually do.

These older people lowering their head to him might not be entirely willing, but they still understood the value of the rank. Thanks to Alus, the load they had to accomplish on missions was lessened, which brought peace to Alpha as a result.

Though, while they knew his face, very few people had witnessed him in battle. That's why most of the people here looked on in confusion as a somewhat frail-looking young man was receiving respect from his elders.

Incidentally, once inside the headquarters, the ostentatious atmosphere presented by its exterior faded somewhat, though the size was still overwhelming. Inside, Magicmasters rotated in and out of standby, being the main force of Alpha's military strength. Excluding the ones out on missions in the Outer World, seventy percent of the Magicmasters of the nation were stationed here.

"I'm starting to get kind of nervous," Alice said. As they stepped inside the building, the sheer number of Magicmasters they encountered as they

walked along was staggering. She seemed a little intimidated, and straightened her back.

With this many Magicmasters, the AWRs they wore stood out. They all looked well-used, which gave off an impressive and imposing aura.

Having experienced the Outer World in the extracurricular lesson, Alice was made painfully aware that this place was the closest of all in the human realm to the Outer World.

"Most of the Magicmasters here are more capable than you guys, after all."

"O-Of course they are!!" Tesfia retorted without a moment's delay, but even she was being a little reserved as she looked at the Magicmasters around them. If they were below students like them, Alpha would have been devoured by Fiends long ago.

"Well, you're on completely different levels, so don't worry too much about it. And since I'm here, there's not much else to worry about either."

"You just do what you please, huh?" Tesfia responded in exasperation. She had a sullen expression, and it was about all she could muster. But she still couldn't help finding it strange that someone her age was being held in such high esteem by adults.

As a member of the Fable family, Tesfia had experienced adults lowering their heads to her as well. But that was because her mother, the head of the family, was walking behind her. She was well aware that she wasn't really the one they were bowing to.

So when Tesfia saw Alus as a lone Magicmaster receiving such respect, she began wanting to make it her goal to reach the same heights.

Then again—since she knew what Alus was normally like, she still felt reluctant about it.

"You can consider it a perk of being a Single." With a dry smile, Alus walked through the base with familiar steps.

The closer they got to the center, the fewer people were unaware of who Alus was. Many stepped out of his way, thanks to his title as Alpha's strongest.

He didn't, however, have any comrades-in-arms that called out to him; and there were even some that turned on their heels and walked away when they spotted him.

Alus boldly strode forth in spite of this, but there was a strange feeling in the air. He'd walked down the hallways of this base countless times, but right now he thought he could feel an oppressive atmosphere around him.

*There's more Magicmasters here than usual. Besides...*

He could see some Magicmasters' faces looking like they were on guard for something. The tension was similar to that of the Outer World. Alus could feel it prickling on his skin. The tense atmosphere wasn't affecting all of the military—just some members of it.



If they were in the Outer World, it would be nothing to concern oneself with. But it didn't make as much sense in the military headquarters. When he thought about it, there seemed to be more guards as well.

*This is a strange sight. Why is the military on guard in their own headquarters?*

Alus considered it for a second, but it didn't seem like they were worried about him, so he decided to put it on the back burner for now.

"I can't tell if you're respected or hated." Completely oblivious to the tension in the air, Tesfia continued on with her carefree remarks from before. She'd seen people recognizing him, and people avoiding him.

"It's a bother either way." To be more accurate, it was a little different from hate. The eyes on him were probably from people on previous missions who'd seen his strength firsthand, and were either astonished by the overwhelming power or afraid of it.

Regardless, nobody tried to form a friendly relationship with him. Alus suspected being directly under the Governor-General's command likely played a part in it as well.

But he didn't feel bothered or lonely because others distanced themselves from him. That had always been the case on the frontlines, too. In this world, there was no guarantee that yesterday's smile would be around for tomorrow.

A vast number of grave markers were located in a lot at the edge of the headquarters' grounds. Only a very few of those buried there had intact bodies. Most of the graves contained only what remains were left, or the belongings of the deceased. It was a tradition for people to go there for a visit when first enlisting in the military.

After reaching the center of the ground floor, they began climbing the stairs. Once they reached the top floor, the atmosphere immediately turned very oppressive.

The high command was gathered here, with the Governor-General's office alongside those of other high-ranking members of the military. The average age of the people here was older, with Magicmasters at the general rank passing through the area with serious expressions on their faces.

The only unchanged thing was Alus' attitude. But at the top, everyone knew of Alus, and many people looked afraid. They all acted cold and distant, in order to not get any closer.

However...

"It's been a while, Alus! I haven't seen you around lately, so what are you up to now?"

Strange humans existed everywhere. That's why true peace was something not so easily obtained.

The person greeting Alus was a man in his early thirties. He'd climbed up the ladder to become a commanding officer at a young age, and was riding the elite path toward the top.

He lacked the characteristic rugged build you usually saw in soldiers, being instead on the slender side. With no AWR at his waist, that was proof that his rank as a Magicmaster was high enough that he no longer needed to step out into the Outer World.

Despite being some distance away for what could be called a friendly conversation, his voice traveled well.

Alus waited until they were close enough that they could hold a normal conversation. "It has been a while, Commander Lindelph."

"Oh, stop that. It creeps me out." Lindelph didn't seem to appreciate Alus' formal way of speaking to him, as he flapped his hand up and down in an exaggerated fashion.

Alus didn't particularly hate this overly friendly man.

"I'm only in this position thanks to you. I wasn't recognized by my own powers alone, so I still have a long way to go."

Lindelph was one of the master strategists in command of the defensive line. He mostly dealt with low-classed Fiends detected near the line, and the units under his command often dealt with those themselves. He was ranked as a colonel. Originally, he was a staff officer integrated into the squad Alus was in.

His skills as a Magicmaster couldn't particularly be praised as great. Without mincing words, he was a leader without ability.

After Alus finished the Magicmaster training program at a young age, they spent some months on the same team. He was one of the few comrades-in-arms that had fought alongside Alus, and was still alive and on active duty.

"Don't be so modest. You're the youngest to be promoted in history, aren't you? I hear there are plenty of jealous voices within the military."

"That hits close to home... Oh?" Seeing the two girls in uniforms half-hiding behind Alus, Lindelph smiled mischievously. "A beauty on either side, aren't you a smooth operator? So you're finally at that age, too. Ah, youth."

"If that's what you think this looks like, you'll probably be demoted soon."

Lindelph's cheek twitched at Alus' cynical response. His wide smile broke up, but he only remarked, "Well, just you watch, I'm planning on making myself an even more integral part of the top brass. But that aside, what business do you have bringing students in?"

"It's not anything special..." Alus stopped as he felt the two girls peeking out from behind him. The looks on their faces seemed to be asking him to introduce them. Enduring the urge to ignore this and move on, Alus briefly introduced the two.

"Let's start with him. This frank guy is Commander Lindelph, who's secretly planning on receiving a posthumous promotion. He's currently being promoted at the speed of an out-of-control train."

"Hey! What's with that dangerous-sounding introduction!"

"And these two are my classmates, Tesfia Fable and Alice Tilake. I only came here because I have some business with the Governor-General."

"Did you say classmates? Here I was thinking that I hadn't seen you for a while, but now you're a student... Vizaist can be pretty mean, he should have said something... but hmm, did you say Fable?"

Lindelph looked deep in thought for a moment. Then he clapped his hands together. "Speaking of Fable, could she be the daughter of former General Frose?"

Tesfia's shoulders trembled at his words, before answering, "Y-Yes..."

"I see, I see... so you're the daughter! I received some harsh training under the former General. Nice to meet you. I'm Lindelph Maeger." Remembering his bitter experiences, Lindelph held his hand out. He was good at commanding, but his skill at magic didn't improve, so his expression wasn't exactly unfounded.

Tesfia took his hand and exchanged a polite handshake, but her expression seemed a little bitter as well.

"This young lady is very beautiful, too."

"Thank you very much." Alice smiled, and shook his hand.

With introductions out of the way, Alus urged Lindelph on. "Now, didn't you have some other business to attend to?" Seeing the stack of documents in his hands, Alus could tell that he must have been on his way to somewhere.

"Right, then I'll be taking my leave here." Lindelph quickly walked away, before turning around as if recalling something. He shouted out, "Alus, why don't we go for dinner next time. I found a nice place!"

Alus wasn't sure what he meant by 'nice place.' Was it good food, or was it the kind of place where gorgeous women would serve them? He paused for a moment to consider Lindelph's personality. "Your wife would kill you."

With the distance between them, Alus' voice probably wouldn't reach him. And considering the content, he hesitated to shout it out loud.

But Lindelph seemed to have a good understanding of Alus' personality, not even paying any heed to his response, as he'd already started walking away again before the response was made.

*Self-centered as always*, Alus thought to himself, as he watched the commander walk away. Leaving Alice and Tesfia, who had perplexed looks, aside, Alus turned his attention again toward where he was headed.

They reached the top floor of the seven-story building.

The Governor-General's office had a sweeping view of the defensive line. In case of emergency, the artificial scenery being displayed inside the barrier could be cut to show the Outer World.

That had never happened, as of yet. Or more accurately stated, since the construction of the Tower of Babel, the artificial imagery had never had to be stopped.

There was dark red carpeting in the office, and almost no furniture. This was to the Governor-General's personal preference. However, it wasn't desolate either, as in place of a luxurious interior there was a mountain of documents.

After permitting his entry, Berwick glanced at the clock as Alus stepped into the room. "How unusual for you to be late, even if only by two minutes."

"Please say that to Commander Lindelph."

"I see." Berwick smiled, and offered Alus a seat on the sofa.

"Hey, get in here already." The two girls stood frozen stiff in the doorway. But their paralysis was broken by Alus' voice.

The next moment, Alice saw the owner of the room, and clapped a hand over her mouth as a surprised "Ah!" escaped her lips.

"It's been a while, Alice." The Governor-General's voice was cheery.







"Alice, you know the Governor-General?"

"Huh, this person is... that soldier?! No way!"

Alus had been told that Berwick was the commander years ago, when they moved to arrest Godma for the Element Factor Separation Project. When Alice was saved from the facility, it looked like he'd taken care of Alice. Perhaps he saw this as an atonement for letting Godma escape.

"I see, so you enrolled into the Institute too... I see, I see."

Only Alus felt something was off with the Governor-General's playful tone, due to having known the man for a long time.

Thinking to himself how shrewd the old man was, Alus started off with an apologetic-sounding statement. "In regards to this incident with Godma, I honestly believe there was some ineptitude on my side."

"Well, don't worry. I've received a report from Vizaist. There's no problem."

Alus had expected that answer. No real harm had occurred, and as the strongest in Alpha, he hadn't been asked to take responsibility for anything trivial in any other mission either.

The reason for that was because Berwick was mostly in command of those missions, and the details of them were never made public.

But this time, despite him having said that there were no problems, Berwick had a serious look to him, although Alus would be the only one to notice.

"But I never would have dreamed that young Alice was your student." Contrary to his words, it seemed that maybe Berwick had anticipated all of this. Perhaps Alus being forced into the Institute and ending up in the same class as those two excellent students Alice and Tesfia, was all according to his plan. This method of Berwick being two or three steps ahead was familiar to Alus. It was like a convenient light appearing to guide him in the darkness.

As the two spoke, Tesfia and Alice sat down on the sofa, but as a soldier Alus remained standing in front of the Governor-General. However, with no outsiders present, his tone remained less than formal.

"It's been a while since I last saw you too, Tesfia, though you probably don't remember."

"Huh?! ...I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't worry about it. It's been a long time since then." Berwick smiled, as he recalled the good old days.

Tesfia's existence was why Frose, her mother, had chosen to retire in the first place. When Frose was active, she served as the supreme commander of a battalion, and was seen as a peerless commander of her time. She excelled at using shrewd tactics to eliminate Fiends.

When she retired, there was a grand party, which was where Berwick met Tesfia. That said, due to the busy nature of the party, they had only exchanged greetings, so it was no wonder she didn't remember him.

"By the way, Alus. You didn't come here just for something like that, did you?" Berwick knew better than anyone that Alus wasn't the kind of person to come all the way here just to apologize for a blunder.

Alus nodded, then moved on to the main topic. "When human experiments were performed on Alice, there were some unexpected side effects. That is to say, I found a defect in her mana information."

"—!! I see."

Alice stiffened.

This also reminded the old general of his past regrets. With a bitter expression, he told Alus to continue in a heavy tone.

"That in itself won't result in any consequences. We could call it a simple accident."

"No, this isn't the kind of problem that can be swept under the rug as an accident," Berwick said. "Especially not when it was manmade."

Alus saw it as something that could be explained away as accidental, but Berwick saw it as something more serious.

"As a result, Alice developed an affinity for attribute-less."

"—!!" Berwick's eyes shot open for a moment, and to calm down he clasped his hands together, resting his elbows on the desk and hiding his mouth.

Alice had already heard this before, so she wasn't very shaken. Meanwhile, Tesfia, who was hearing this for the first time, looked perplexed rather than shocked.

"So like you, she's..."

Alus stopped Berwick by raising his hand. He hadn't told Alice everything yet; in fact, he'd only told her a portion of the truth. "She's attribute-less, but it's not the same as me."

Hearing that, Berwick immediately realized he'd almost carelessly let something slip. He cleared his throat and nodded.

However, that truth raised a concern. It showed the possibility of artificially creating people with an affinity for attribute-less through human experiments.

Berwick glanced at the two on the sofa. "Is... is something like that possible?"

"I imagine it would be impossible to do intentionally. It was likely all a coincidence. And it's not like she's lost all of her mana information, like me. It would be more apt to assume that a portion of the light attribute was altered."

"I see. So that's the reason why you came all this way."

"That's why I believe it's the Governor-General's duty to protect her, so she's not made a subject for strange research again."

Berwick exhaled. "Of course. You don't have to bring up duty. If something happens, I'll back you up."

"Thank you very much."

"You don't have to thank me over something like this. If anything, I'd like to offer my support. Don't worry, I'll guarantee your safety. As long as you don't throw yourself into it, that is."

Alice, embarrassed, bowed as a sign of her deep gratitude towards Berwick.

To be honest, Alus came here to secure this pledge from the Governor-General. If the secret of Alice's affinity for attribute-less were to get out, people with a similar mindset as Godma were sure to appear.

*Anyway, that should settle things for now...* or at least that's what Berwick thought.

Tesfia and Alice looked to be getting up from the sofa, when Alus quickly changed topics. "Oh, and Governor-General, about the Friendship Magical Tournament..."

"Hm?" Berwick gave him a puzzled look, followed by Tesfia and Alice's similar expressions.

"Now that you mention it..." Tesfia said.

"It's a big annual event, after all," Alice chimed in.

Berwick said, "What about it... Ah, this is because of Vizaist, isn't it?"

Hearing Berwick's remark, Alus continued without affirming it, "I have no intention of participating."

"I figured you'd say that, but you won't get anywhere by talking to me. You're already a student at the Institute, and they're the ones who do the selection."

Alus responded with a wry smile. "So that means you won't interfere then, if I were to fail."

"... I won't accept any corner-cutting."

"—!!"

"Even if it's a friendly tournament, it's still an official event—and a legitimate match."

It seemed Berwick had an answer for everything. This meant that if Alus were to fail the selection, Berwick would definitely intervene. In essence, this was an order to Alus.

That said, Berwick understood that he was forcing the matter. He sighed, and rubbed his temples. "I just got a call from Rusalca, letting me know that their nation has a lot of excellent Magicmasters lined up this year, too."

Rusalca was a big nation near Alpha. And they'd secured the victory in the Friendship Magical Tournament the year before.

Alpha trained a lot of excellent Magicmasters as well, but Rusalca was particularly passionate in their training, and had snatched victory from Alpha's hands.

Unfortunately, when recounting Alpha's results in the tournament, you'd find them faster by starting at the bottom.

Berwick wanted Alus to participate so that Alpha could have a better record. While the country's pride was involved, some personal feelings were mixed in as well.

"No matter what Rusalca said, I refuse. That has nothing to do with me." With Alus being a student this year, he had qualified to participate.

"Oh, it's not all bad. If we can show the world that Alpha trains superb Magicmasters, it will be easier for you in the future."

"Do you think I'm naïve enough to fall for something like that?"

"I'm not asking you to do it for nothing. I'll even get you ten rare books from other nations. Even if you're not hurting for money, there are some things that you can't just get your hands on, aren't there?"

"Tsk..." Despite knowing he was being led by the nose, Alus couldn't help but hesitate with a reward like that being offered. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Alus already had all the important rare books in Alpha. He'd gathered enough knowledge. But his spirit of inquiry didn't have any brakes.

Meanwhile, Tesfia and Alice were blankly staring at the scene before them.

Berwick took to the offensive when he saw Alus stopping to think it over. "Additionally, I wouldn't mind speaking with Sisty about omitting a portion of next term's credits, if you get good results at the tournament."

"Y... You're on." Alus finally succumbed to temptation, and grabbed Berwick's outstretched hand.

"That's dirty!" Tesfia muttered, after seeing the whole thing play out before her eyes.

"He got bribed," Alice said cheerfully.

Berwick smiled wryly at the two girls. "There are just some adult circumstances. Isn't it only natural for an adult to reward those who do well?"

"... Just this one time, though," Alus said preemptively. But Berwick thought to himself that he'd be able to use this method several times over in the future.

Ultimately, Berwick had ended up profiting off of Alus' unchanged personality, while Alus' resentment remained unresolved. Fundamentally, only an equivalent exchange, a compensation for his efforts, could make him move. A fair trade was fine, but a one-sided negotiation killed his free soul.

Alus had experienced that enough times to get sick of it. That's why he didn't demand something as vague as trust, but instead pain equal to what he felt from having his freedom chipped away, as compensation from the other party.

That said, he had to admit that something as uncertain as trust did exist between him and Berwick, because everything they'd agreed on here was simply a verbal promise. In a sense, it showed how close they were.

But it wasn't over yet. Berwick stared seriously at Alus, as if to say they still had something to discuss.

"... Sorry, Fia and Alice, but could you step outside for a while? It seems I didn't receive enough yet," Alus said.

"—!! Aren't you being a little greedy?" Tesfia asked, exasperated, when Alus flashed a dark smile.

Alice grasped at her best friend's sleeve to soothe her. "Come on, Fia. Al had a lot of things going on too... we'll be waiting outside."

"Yeah, you do that. I'll be with you soon."

After bowing to the Governor-General once more, Alice left the room, pushing Tesfia ahead of her. But before she stepped out, she looked back.

"Al, don't cause too much trouble, okay?"

"That depends on what the enemy does."

"Oh, geez," Alice moaned, as she gave him a resigned smile and left.

With the two of them out of the room, Berwick made a show of his relaxed sigh. "Sorry about that. I might cause young Alice to worry for no reason if I were to say it in front of her. I'm sure she's suffered through more than enough..."

"Is that something you'd say to someone looking to become a Magicmaster? It's not a thing you can pull off if you're weak."

"I know that. But rushing through it is difficult. Everyone needs to take measured steps to advance, especially so if they're walking down a thorny path."

"How protective of you."

"Don't say that. Not everyone can make clear decisions as you do." Beneath his gentle expression, Berwick conveyed his bitter emotions.

Normally, it wasn't a decision made so easily, nor was it one that was all good. But Berwick had the responsibility of forcing his hand. His complex emotions were due to his awareness of that.

"Alright, get to the main topic already. Who knows what those two will say if I keep them waiting."

"Hmph, I see even a Single has no chance against the ladies." Berwick's expression eased up for a moment as he poked fun at Alus.

So far they'd just been exchanging pleasantries... but from that point on, Berwick's demeanor turned into that of a strict military man.

Seeing that, Alus eliminated anything unnecessary, including his emotions, his face turning expressionless. Even the tone of his voice turned blank, simply stating information in a matter-of-fact way. "If you're worried about Alice, does that mean this is Godma-related? I doubt the headquarters security being beefed up is unrelated, as well."

As a heavy atmosphere overtook the room, Berwick nodded. "We still haven't fully grasped who was behind the incident, with Godma himself being our only lead. And information has to be obtained, even if the person's life is coming to an end."

"Using the dark attribute for interrogation goes against international law."

"... There are some who feel that there are exceptions to everything."

It was possible to use dark attribute magic to control the mind. And a way of interrogation used in the past was a brainwashing type of method to extract information.

Serious offenses by Magicmasters tended to be covered up by the military or nation, in all the seven nations. Crimes that disturbed the national order were especially dangerous, and the nations did whatever it took to solve them.

"As you know, a taboo spell not even recorded in the spell encyclopedia, Grimoire, has been confirmed to have been used. So this won't end at Godma," Berwick said.

"I'll bet. Godma isn't a Magicmaster, but a researcher, and devoted to it as well. It's only natural to suspect someone behind him, if even he was able to make use of taboo spells."

"That's right. While we couldn't expect much, we should still have been able to extract some nugget of information from him."

"Should have?" Alus asked. "Meaning...?"

"The day after he was put on life support, he was murdered."

"—!!" Alus narrowed his eyes. He immediately guessed at the circumstances around the situation, as well as its severity.

Since he was an important prisoner, Godma should have been securely confined by the military. That meant he'd been killed inside a military base, which seemed unlikely. Even Alus, well-versed in covert operations, would avoid committing a crime inside a military base.

Military facilities were full of spotters, and experienced, excellent Magicmasters. Committing a crime somewhere like that, undetected, was simply impossible. It was nothing short of a suicide attack, but based on Berwick's manner of speaking, it seemed that the culprit hadn't taken their own life, nor had they been apprehended.

As Alus gazed at Berwick, he received a bitter answer in response.

"It's exactly what you think. The culprit completely escaped us. They located the room that only the brass knew about, and got inside. They also knocked out the security systems. The crime took place during the few minutes it took to bring them back online... we couldn't confirm their appearance, but we managed to identify the remnant mana, and after an analysis we were able to link it to someone in the military. The problem is that said person was, without a doubt, in the Outer World when the crime took place, with the other squad members attesting to that as well. It's a truly perplexing situation."

It was a mysterious phenomenon that was normally unthinkable. But Berwick had already settled on a criminal profile. There wasn't any confusion on his face, nor did he look like he'd given up, as he had his eyes set on a specific target.

The incident was completely unbelievable, yet it pointed to a single possibility.



"A crime committed by those using Godma behind the scenes... in other words..." The situation reminded Alus of a name that could never be made public. When thinking of who was capable of making a practically impossible crime possible—only *that* name came to mind.

Berwick knew exactly who Alus meant with his vague words, and affirmed it with, "There's probably no doubt about it. They haven't made any moves since you dealt with one of their cadre... but it seems they're on the move again."

"That's the most logical conclusion. The seven nations have allowed too much corruption to exist." The razor-sharp coldness of Alus' words highlighted the threat this organization posed to them.

"We're in the middle of investigating as deeply as we can. Also, we were unable to locate that book, one of the Four Books of Fegel that you reported on."

"I see. Well, I had no conclusive evidence that the book I saw was one of them."

"I find it hard to believe that you of all people would make such a misjudgment. Even if you did, we haven't even found a book that matched your description."

"If it really is one of the originals," Alus said, "there's no doubt that they would try to recover it."

"Indeed."

"Maybe I should have prioritized recovering it during combat."

"Perhaps," Berwick said. "But you can hardly be blamed for that during a mission. Anyway, that's about all I have for you now."

"Well, vacation's over, so I should be taking my leave... I just hope they can stay quiet for a little longer," Alus said with a fed-up expression, taking his leave.

"We might have you make a move again," Berwick said firmly, in his role as head of the military

Alus all but ignored this as he made his way to the door, but as he reached it, he stopped with his back to Berwick and said, "You'll be too late." With that, he stepped outside.

If they had moved faster, then perhaps everything could have been taken care of in the darkness.

\* \* \*

On the way back, Alus stopped at Folen as he said he would. Even if they took their time, they shouldn't be home too late. Besides, it might be the perfect way to blow off some steam.

But as expected in a prosperous city, it would take more than a day to go through all the stores. Just as Alus thought they'd need to narrow their choices down, he realized those two weren't following him.

"Fia, what do you think this is?"

"Hmm... I don't know."

The two were pressed up against a window display, gazing at the goods for sale with confused faces. In the display case were coins engraved with circular magic formulas.

"They're smoke signals. In the military they're used to request backup, or tell others their location. There's also some that can be used as smokescreens against Fiends."

"Really?" Alice said.

"So this place even has things like that..." Tesfia marveled.

These were inexpensive consumer goods, but the higher quality items went for higher prices, and compared to the lower quality items they could sell for ten times the price. But when buying these things, it was common practice to buy from stores that served the military. Being too penny-pinching could land you with tools that failed to work properly when you needed them the most, or even some that would explode before you could use them.

Those familiar with magic formulas could judge the quality by looking at the engravings, but this was beyond a normal Magicmaster.

Tesfia and Alice didn't seem interested in buying anything, but that didn't stop them from looking at display windows every time they saw something that caught their eye.

Alus quickly realized they would never get anywhere if this went on. Which was why—"I'm going to a store where I'm a regular, so let's meet at the transfer gate in an hour."

"Don't leave me behind! I'm coming too," Tesfia quickly said.

"Me too!" said Alice.

They immediately claimed they'd follow him, the moment he said it. Alus shrugged, and decided to drive his point home. "I don't mind, but it's going to be boring." He knew it was probably pointless though. Considering the sparkles in their eyes, everything they saw must have been new to them.

After that, he trod through a narrow alleyway, making his way to the familiar shop at the end.

The shop was located within an old, decrepit building, which looked like a normal residence from the outside.

The two girls let out sudden cries, because they thought Alus was trespassing.

As he opened the wooden door, the bell rang out with a dull sound. This was an industrial city, and the fact that a building like this still remained was quite remarkable. According to the proprietor himself, it was because it had charm to it.

"Old man, you here?"

"That voice is... oh, it's just you." The vigorous voice of an old man from deep inside the store responded to Alus.

Age-wise, it wouldn't be strange to see him walking with a cane, but it would be quite a long while until this man needed one. A fire still burned in his eyes.

The old man had given Alus a disappointed look and rude reply, but Alus ignored it. After all, this happened every time. As far as he knew, the old man did the same thing to all his customers. But he wasn't senile or anything; he actually had a fantastic memory for his age.

The full name of the one called 'old man' by the neighborhood was Budna Yorts. He was something of a well-known AWR technician in Folen.

"How's business been looking lately?"

"Well, it has been darn confounding. Since a month ago, when we got newly designed AWRs from Rusalca, the wares have been streaming in at a terrific pace."

"Is it that different?"

The old man was particularly well-informed about the news in Folen. Moreover, he was an extremely skilled AWR smith. He'd been in the military's AWR production department in his younger days, and even after quitting the department he'd made use of his know-how to get by. He was known as a master craftsman in the right circles.

"Naw, they're not that much different from the others. But it's more that the kinds of AWRs that a Single or Double uses are being mass-produced. Right now, a magic book type AWR, like the one that Single used. What was her name again? Anyways, that one's very popular right now. Even though only a fraction can make full use of it."

Budna had a sharp nose when it came to business. Doubles were recognized by the public enough as they were, but Singles were admired by all. As a result, the type of AWRs they used turned into something like brands. Of course, the material used was different in order to bring down the cost.

"So I take it the other stores are in a slump?"

"You'd think so... wouldn't you?" Budna had a sharp stare beneath his long eyelashes.

The stream of AWRs from Rusalca should have been making a mess of the market, but Budna seemed unperturbed by it. "Of course, it's a blow to the unimpressive AWR craftsmen. But strangely enough, the purchase of military articles increased around the same time. In fact, at a glance, we're prospering more than ever before."

"Isn't that good, then? I doubt it'll last long anyways."

All the craftsmen around here were proud of their skills. They could easily overcome minor troubles like this. Ultimately, the world of the craftsmen was a place where skill trumped all, and Alus knew this too.

"It's not a bad thing, of course. But there are things you get when you do business here. What I hear is that it's not soldiers doing the buying, nor is it some broker that's settled down here. It appears they be avoiding the public eye, making large orders and buying up the goods. It's organized and in large numbers to boot. I don't know what they're after, but it'd be harder not to notice them moving about when they're this active."

"Aren't they just making investments in a popular product?" Alus asked.

"You'd think so. But in just two weeks, enough goods to last four months have been bought up here in Folen."

That was indeed suspicious. The military wasn't related to the buying, so perhaps it was a peddler without a base within the nation. Still, it was unnatural for them to buy up this much. "I see. I'll keep that in mind. So, can I see that new AWR?"

"Naw, you probably won't find any left in this city."

"Oh," Alus said, in a disappointed voice. Having had his research ambitions stirred, hearing that made him feel discouraged.

"Well, don't worry. The AWR you're using is my greatest masterpiece. You don't need a replacement. And even if I tried to mass produce it, you're the only one who could use it."

Like Budna said, Alus' AWR, Night Mist, was a joint work made by the two of them. Making use of the most cutting-edge technology, each and every ring had been carefully made and engraved with superfine magic formulas.

Due to the difficulty of handling it, Night Mist was extremely picky when it came to choosing its wielder. If someone who didn't understand the essence of Lost Spells tried to use it, they'd find it hard to even activate a spell.

"Huh, you're the one who made Al's AWR?" Alice, who'd been carefully perusing the wares of the store, said in surprise.

"Aye, but it was a collaboration. He engraved the magic formulas while I made the AWR." Budna closed his eyes and glowed in self-satisfaction, as he reminisced about the time when he'd finished his masterpiece.

While he did so, Tesfia picked up one of the wares for sale.

The moment she did, Budna's eyes shot open. "Hey!! Don't touch the goods, missy!"

"Let me touch them just a little... you don't have to be so stingy!" Tesfia complained, though she hurriedly put the item back on the shelf.

With a *harumph*, Budna turned back to Alus. "But still, it's rare to see you come here with others."

"There were some special circumstances."

Undeterred by Budna's scolding, Tesfia continued rummaging through the store with sparkling eyes. Budna narrowed his wrinkled eyes further, keeping an eye on her. Once she was done perusing, she suddenly blurted out a frank compliment. "But this place really has an amazing assortment... even an amateur like me can tell."

"—! That so? Hmm, I see you have a pretty discerning eye. That's exactly right, I'm proud of everything here. For example, the one over there is..." Just a moment ago he'd been looking at Tesfia with suspicion, but his expression had turned joyful now.

Since the old man would go on forever if you complimented him, Alus quickly brought the discussion back on topic. "Well, actually I'd already finished the design for the AWR, but when I brought it to the military, they

told me it was impossible to make something so advanced. That's why I brought it here, to a smith I'd heard good things about." By using Night Mist, Alus successfully baited Budna back on track.

"The rings are actually made of the exact same material as the blade," Budna told Tesfia. "I also applied a coating to make them suitable for engraving magic formulas on."

"Really? There are hundreds of rings, right?"

"Aye, and those alone took me two years. I haven't gotten any job as big as that since then. A long time has passed since I took on that job..." Budna said, as he began to pour hot water into a small teapot.

Sensing he was about to drift off-topic again, Alus decided to get right to business. "For starters, have you got any good, high quality materials for AWRs?"

"Everything in my store has been judged by my own eye. Right now, the only thing I don't have on hand is mithril."

"Well, it can take months between mithril discoveries, so that can't be helped. What other stuff do you have?"

Mithril was a type of magical metal widely used for various magical purposes. It was also one of the best materials for AWRs, and due to its scarcity, it required a great deal of luck to get your hands on some.

What Alus meant by 'other stuff' wasn't referring to other high quality materials, but rather, what other different materials Budna had.

Budna understood that right away. After all, Alus was a regular, and they went way back. "I can't say I don't have anything..." With a fearless smile, he stood up and headed into the back room.

He soon returned with a golden ingot in his hand.

"What's that?" Tesfia exclaimed.

"Don't know," Budna replied.

Surprised by its luster, Tesfia butted in to get a closer look. "Gold?"

"Hey! You're nobility, so don't act so greedy!"

Brushing Alus' words aside, Tesfia stared curiously at the ingot. "Don't be so stingy, it's beautiful... so is this gold?"

"Naw, it's not. To be honest, I don't really know what kind of material it is. It has some good mana conductivity, so I'm sure it'll make for a fine AWR, but since its composition can't be analyzed I can't use it as material in my products."

"It can't be analyzed?" Tesfia said. "That's interesting."

Normally that meant that it couldn't be analyzed using current technology, or that it couldn't be put out for analysis due to special circumstances.

For example, it might be something that came from the black market that couldn't be manufactured through normal means, and was thus illegal. It could even be material that would lead to punishment if it was identified and in a person's possession.

Based on Budna's statement, it seemed to be the former, something your average artisan couldn't analyze. But the shop owner also felt the substance hadn't been acquired through regular means either, making it a very shady piece of material. "I was thinking of letting you see it when you next showed your mug here. So, do you recognize it?"

Alus handled the golden ingot and carefully looked it over. It didn't seem to be a normal mineral, but he couldn't really tell. "Old man, how much do you want for this?"

"I'm not struggling for money. So just take the average price of some material lying around here. In return..."

"I know. If I manage to analyze this mineral, I'll ask you to make an AWR with it," Alus said. He pulled out his license, which also served as a money card, and held it over the payment terminal.

Seeing that, Budna quickly worked the register. The number that showed up had six zeroes after it.

"—!!" Alice reacted.

"It's that much?!" Tesfia cried.

"This shop only carries high-quality stuff. That thing you picked up before costs a pretty penny, too," Alus told her.

"Seriously?!"

"At the very least, it costs more than the yearly wage of your average Magicmaster."

Having said that, what Alus bought wasn't on the level of an annual income, but instead on the level of buying a house. But depending on the outcome of the analysis, it might end up being worth far more.

However, it would stand out if he brought it home like this, so Budna put the ingot in a plain wooden box.

The elderly man's eyes weren't just lit up by the golden glow of the ingot, but also with hopes that with this, he'd be able to make his greatest work yet. He had the spirit of a true artisan, Alus thought, as he told Budna, "I'll see you again soon."

He then left the store with the two girls in tow.

Time had passed before they knew it. It was getting dark outside. At this time of day, Folen took on a different face. The main street was suddenly lined with stands, and the town that smelled of iron completely changed. Unlike daylight hours, the main street was lively, and you'd be forgiven for thinking there was a festival going on.

At night, the industrial city's craftsmen set up stalls selling accessories and miscellaneous goods as a side job, and to take a break. As a result, the main street was dazzling, and saw a surge of female customers.

"You can find accessories that are more sturdy here, instead of one of those boutiques over there. Stalls like these can have unexpected bargains, too..." Alus was of the mind that the sturdier something was the better, which was a completely different mindset from the female fashion-oriented one.

But not a single word of what he said reached the girls anyway, as they were totally fixated on visiting all of the stalls.

"Isn't this beautiful, Fia?" Even Alice's words went unheard. Tesfia was running from stand to stand, licking her lips at the wares on display.

"Geez..." With a dumbfounded look, Alice turned to Alus, but in reality she looked just as eager as Tesfia.

Just a quick look was enough for even Alus to guess at what she wanted. "That's fine, just don't get lost." They were on the way back after all, and he'd said it would be fine, so Alus decided to quietly follow after them.

Alice was excited, but Tesfia stared at literally everything around her, busily running around. Alus eventually got sick of it, and decided to just wait in the middle of the street.

As a result, he stood in the middle of the road with nothing to do for a time, while the two girls went every which way the moment they spotted anything interesting.

Finally, they suddenly stopped. Alus noticed this, and headed for the stall that seemed to have seized their attention. It was a simple stall consisting of wares placed on top of a sheet on a board.

However, the colorful wares themselves interested the girls to the point of them crouching down to get a closer look.

"Hey uncle, how much for this?" Tesfia picked up a pretty hair clip and asked this of the stall owner in a lively voice.

The owner looked a little too young to be called 'uncle,' but he showed no signs of being upset as he raised three fingers.

The currency that humanity used was called a Deld. The coins were made of copper, silver and gold, and their worth was 500, 5,000 and 10,000 Deld respectively.

There were also 100 Deld paper notes, and half notes worth 50 Deld.

But with the increase in the number of Magicmasters, there was little coinage and notes left in circulation. It was now common to use a money card, or a license if you had one, to pay.

The man was holding up three fingers, and normally you'd imagine that meant 3,000 Deld. "That's 30,000 Deld."

"—!! That's expensive," Alice exclaimed, in a tone of frustration.

Tesfia, on the other hand, calmly put the hair clip back.

"Sorry, but if I go any lower I'll lose money." The owner smiled wryly. It really was the best he could do, and he almost looked apologetic about it.

Alus, having arrived at the stall, sarcastically called out to Tesfia, "You're nobility, so don't be such a cheapskate. I bet you get more than enough in allowance for that."

"I don't have enough money to splurge. I'm a working student, you know!"

Hearing such a reasonable answer, even Alus fell quiet.

Thirty thousand Deld was enough for an adult to live off of for a month. The closer you were to the defensive line, the cheaper the land got, and the

further away the more expensive it became. For a place like this, the rent would be around 40,000 Deld. That also happened to be the average monthly wage of a non-Magicmaster.

A Magicmaster earned around 400,000 Deld a month, and those who worked in the Outer World also received bonuses based on their achievements. With those circumstances in mind, a 30,000 Deld purchase wasn't cheap.

However, even Alus could tell that the hair clip Tesfia chose was a fine quality accessory. Even without the beautiful craftsmanship, it was very durable and wouldn't break easily. The creator might have been an AWR smith, as it consisted of the same kind of material used to make AWRs, not obstructing the flow of mana.

Tesfia gazed longingly at the hair clip again. Alice, who'd had a similar discussion with the stall owner, sadly put back the bracelet she'd picked up.

This stall carried some pretty expensive things, Alus thought to himself. Which meant that he probably made a lot of sales. The cost of things like this at the other stalls would only run a few 1,000 Deld.

Stalls sometimes carried expensive goods like this, but these prices were a bit much. But from Alus' judgment, this kind of item would cost twice as much at the stores. In that sense, the two girls had a good eye for quality.

It was then that Alus spotted a case by the owner's feet. "Hm? What's that?" Since it was by his feet, it might not be for sale, but it grabbed Alus' attention.

"I see you make astute observations. I thought this would cost too much to sell at my stall, and I didn't want to put it out with the other wares."

Inside the case was a pendant. It had a silver chain made with fine workmanship, and the gem-like ball was a cloudy white. Size-wise, it was about as big as a thumbnail.

It was hard to describe it as beautiful. But Alus let out a groan as he realized what the ball was. "This ball is a type of magic stone, huh."

"—!! Just who are you? This isn't something you'd find around here."

The owner's observation was spot on. Magic stones were most often carried by Magicmasters on missions in the Outer World as a necessity. While they weren't incorporated into AWRs, gemstones with high mana conductivity were called magic stones. Many of them had the property of confining mana within them, and they were processed based on the type of stone.

The pendant's ball was a hazy white color inside. Alus predicted that the mana stone would be classified as a seal stone. Seal stones worked by sealing one's own mana inside them, and could be used as decoys to confuse Fiends. It came in handy when escaping multiple Fiends.

The reason why the owner said you couldn't find it around here was simple. This kind of mana stone was manufactured as military munitions. To turn one into a decoration was exceedingly rare.



"I think this is the first time I've seen one fashioned as an accessory, and the raw material is different from the usual stuff the military uses, isn't it?" Alus asked.

"That's right."

Which meant there was nothing to complain about with regards to this item. Alus also hadn't forgotten about finding a gift for Loki. Not only was it unusual, but he felt it was an interesting idea, too.

But when it came to accessories—the gem itself felt lacking. While he wasn't looking for something obviously expensive such as what nobility would prefer, even he felt a dull white color was lacking in beauty.

Seeing Alus deep in thought, the owner began ambitiously describing his ware. "The gem is what's called a calderite." It was a special, high purity quartz. Not only was it a seal stone, but it was also used to identify a Magicmaster's affinity. "This is a first-class product that's been made with great skill. The chain's made of mithril, and it was designed by a first-rate craftsman. Yet, you saw right through it."

The owner bent over, his hand held over his mouth as he whispered, "The murkiness inside responds to mana flowing through it, and lights up depending on the attribute. For example, the water attribute would turn it a deep blue..."

"That's interesting, but it wouldn't last long like that," Alus said.

Once mana was outside the body, the information began to decay. In other words, as time passed, the remains of the mana would eventually disappear. Seal stones were originally made to contain mana, but even the ones used as decoys in the military only lasted a day at most.

"They've thought of that. The surface has been coated to maintain mana semi-permanently. So once you pass your mana through it, the color will remain the same after it changes."

"I see. So how much is it?"

When Alus asked this, the owner got an apologetic look on his face. "I'm afraid a youth like you can't afford it. It's 3,600,000 Deld."

However, that was far lower than what Alus anticipated. He'd braced himself for it to cost at least 5,000,000 Deld, so he almost jumped at the offer immediately; but then he realized he could squeeze a little more out of it. "That's fine. I'll buy it, so throw in that and that," he said, pointing to the items Tesfia and Alice had wanted.

"—!!"

Alus pulled his license out, in front of the wide-eyed stall owner.

Seeing that, the owner finally understood that he was dealing with a Magicmaster. "I see. I don't mind selling them as a set, but seriously, who are you?"

"I'm just a Magicmaster. You don't come across something like this often... still, at 3,600,000 Deld will you even make a profit off of this?"

"Well, I did say that I didn't have any intention of selling it, but in reality I just couldn't find a buyer. That's why I left it in the case. It was just too

expensive to sell around here... I probably won't make another one of these. But I'm moved to hear you say that."

It need not be said that not all of the city's craftsmen were crafty salesmen.

Alus held the license against the card reader and finished paying.

"Thank you for your patronage," the stall owner said, as he saw Alus and the others off with a look of satisfaction.

"Thank you, Al!" Tesfia said.

"Thank you so much!!" Alice said happily.

Tesfia received the hair clip from him and Alice the bracelet. The two put their new gifts on right away, with excited expressions.

"Well, it was just because I was buying a souvenir for Loki." In reality, it really didn't cost very much for Alus. So if they were happy over something like this, then that was fine too...

"I feel like my sense of money is going to be thrown out of whack when I'm with you," Tesfia said, but with a bright smile.

It seemed the two girls were completely satisfied. Now all that was left was to return home.

True, it might not have been a cheap purchase, but Magicmasters received a high salary. As the highest-ranked Magicmaster of them all, Alus had more money than he could ever spend.

A portion of that money came from his research results, but the majority was from his retaking land on his own. Normally, several hundred high-ranking Magicmasters would be sent out to retake land. Since Alus would receive the same money all of them collectively would receive, he easily had more money than the Governor-General.

\* \* \*

Alus came back to the laboratory a bit later than dinner time.

It was nearly dorm curfew time, but Tesfia and Alice accompanied him back to the laboratory, and without any hesitation, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

When the door opened, a silver-haired girl was waiting for him.

The moment Alus caught a glimpse of silver when he opened the door, his face twitched. It was like being faced with a ticking time bomb.

He saw Loki dressed in an apron, her arms crossed and cheeks puffed up with resentment. Her powerful stare shot lasers at Alus' eyes, and silence followed. No one wanted to be the first to speak in a chilly atmosphere like this one.

However, it seemed that could be handled based on one's position and how one used it.

"Ah, oh, would you look at the time... I guess I'll be taking my leave then!" Alice was unable to look Loki in the eye, and came up with an excuse to escape the laboratory. It was a dirty method of pushing all the responsibilities of dealing with Loki onto one person.

And following on to that—“T-That’s true! We can’t miss the curfew!” Tesfia desperately tried using logic. She also couldn’t look at Loki.

*I was the only one who cared about the curfew to begin with,* Alus retorted in his head. He had half a mind to cut off their escape, but reconsidered, since it wouldn’t be very mature.

“Then, see you later, Al. And thanks for today!”

“See you tomorrow. I’ll take good care of this.” Tesfia showed off her new hair clip in her ponytail, as she turned to the door. But the red gem in it might just have added further fuel to the flame.

When Loki stared at the hair clip, her eyes narrowed further.

*Saying thanks was fine, but why’d they have to do it now? These girls just returned a favor with spite.*

Sensing a dangerous aura coming from Loki, Alus was unable to take his eyes off of her, but he mentally cursed the two girls he could hear walking away from the laboratory.

At last, Loki gave a long sigh. “So, where did you go today?” When she finally spoke, she didn’t sound as angry as expected. If anything, she sounded exasperated.

It wasn’t like Alus had any ill intentions. He’d only left a note for her because he didn’t want to wake her up when she was so worn out. “We went to the Governor-General’s office to talk about Alice’s attribute-less affinity, and to request his support.”

“I see, and it looks like it went all right. But if you were going to go through the trouble of writing me a note, you could have just woken me up.”

“You helped me out writing reports all night. I’m not cruel enough to force you to get up when you’re tired.” Alus started to walk on, as if to say that was that. As he passed by her, he put his hand on her head.

“Sir Alus should be tired too, so how could I sleep?” Loki rebutted in a voice so quiet that Alus decided he could brush it off.

Thinking he’d successfully dodged the question, he sighed in relief.

“So, on your way back, you enjoyed a date with those two.” Contrary to Alus’ prayers, Loki had seen through him. And she’d heard what the girls said. When that kind of thing played out before her very eyes, of course she wouldn’t overlook it.

“It’s those two, so of course it wasn’t a date, and those gifts were just something I got while I was out.” Alus rummaged through his pocket and pulled out a stylishly wrapped package. The stall owner had showed an unexpected amount of consideration and taste. “Here, it’s your reward for this time.”

“Huh?!”

He carelessly handed over the small box to Loki, who reflexively took it. The small box was wrapped in paper, with a cute ribbon for decoration.

“... Can I open it?”

Alus responded with a simple “Yeah” as he moved to his room to change clothes.

“...!!”

He could hear the sound of the box being opened, but a long silence followed after that. When he finished changing, Alus returned to the room and asked if she didn't like it. “If you didn't, I'm sorry. I'm not really used to this whole present-giving thing.”

“No...” With downcast eyes, Loki was clutching the pendant against her chest. “I'm just happy... thank you very much, Sir Alus.”

As Loki looked up at him, her eyes welled with tears of joy that looked like they might spill over at a single blink.

“It was a surprisingly good find, and if you pour mana through the stone it'll supposedly light up beautifully depending on the disposition of your mana. I'm sure it'll be a beautiful color if you try it.”

“Yes,” Loki said, and looked down at it again. After rubbing her eyes, she returned his gaze with a huge smile on her face. As if to try it out right away, she put the pendant on the palm of her hand... but didn't let any mana course through it. “... Sir Alus, how many times will this react to my mana?”

Magic mana stones were all single-use items. Alus responded with what the stall owner had told him. “Just once. And supposedly it's been coated so that the mana information sealed within won't decay.”

Loki cast her eyes down once more, before looking at Alus with a firm resolve. “Then can I ask you, Sir Alus?”

“You mean... using my mana?”

Loki nodded, with a smile that expressed that was how she truly felt about it.

Mana information reflected the attribute as well as all kinds of tidbits. It included everything about the person, even their accumulated experiences.

Which was why... “I don't think my mana will make a beautiful color.” Thinking of his dirty past, Alus' mana was abnormal. That's why his mana would never in his life give a clear light to a gem.

“I want it to be your mana.” Loki desperately tried to keep her racing emotions from showing, holding the pendant out towards Alus, who casually grabbed it.

They say women can't help but be attracted to sparkling things. In that sense, Alus' mana wasn't really a suitable fit.

Well, if that's what Loki wanted, arguing against it any further would be uncouth. While he wasn't really inclined to do so, Alus let his mana flow through the pendant.

He then slowly opened his hand. As his hand opened to reveal the pendant, Loki gazed steadily over it.

“... I told you.” Like Alus expected, the gem had turned the color of blackest night, with no stars to see. There were even several cracks running inside of it. Leaving it as a dull white would have been better. “Sorry about this. I'll get you a new one someday.”

However, the pendant was plucked out of his hand. "Thank you very much, Sir Alus! I'm so happy... I couldn't ask for anything more."

Alus' mana was inside of this. A portion of what he'd built up; and Loki valued being able to feel that close to her more than anything else. There wasn't anything better she could ask for.

"Like I said, it's been coated. While I don't think it's been weakened by the cracks... are you really fine with that? Pendants can be much more beautiful..."

"This is fine. This is what I want. And you said that there are more beautiful things, but to me there's nothing more beautiful than this!" Loki pressed the pendant to her chest, as if to embrace it.

Seeing that, the edges of Alus' lips curled up into something of a wry smile. Ultimately, he didn't understand how a woman's heart worked. "Well, if you're fine with it, then that's that." That was about all he could manage to say.

"Sir Alus, could you put it on?"

Alus nodded and took the chain in his hand, the cracked black gem dangling below. Loki turned around and brought her hand behind her neck to brush her hair away. Her white slender nape was captivating. Alus put the chain around her neck and closed the clasp.

Loki then let her hair down, turning to face him and asking him how she looked. The gem hanging at her collarbone shone against her pale skin.





"Yeah, it suits you."

"Thank you very much," Loki told him, with a bashful blush. As long as the person herself liked it, Alus was fine with it.

"More importantly, dinner."

"Yes! I'll prepare it right away." Loki got to work on dinner in high spirits, looking as if she'd start humming at any moment. The dinner must have already been made some time ago, as she only had to lightly heat it up and put it on the table.

Alus sat down, and as he was about to bring the food to his mouth—

"But you got those two presents, too."

"—!"

*Couldn't you have just let it be?* he thought to himself, as he froze. When he did, the food on his fork fell off.

"... Only while I was out."



## Seventeenth Chapter

### The Aristocrats' Tea Party

Tesfia was saying her sorrowful farewell to Alice by the dorm entrance. She was facing her biggest challenge—returning home, where her mother awaited.

When she went home during summer vacation, her stay had been cut short when the Institute was attacked.

Yesterday, she received a message from her mother to come back home, now that the incident was over. Based on her mother's personality, Tesfia imagined she wanted more than a simple report on the current situation. She couldn't hide her gloom. Just being with her mother was painful.

Her mother, Frose, had been a general, leading Magicmasters on large-scale extermination missions. After that, she'd served as an instructor, training Magicmasters for live combat.

That was why she was particularly strict with those traveling down the path of magic; she didn't even show any mercy towards her own daughter.

She'd retired when her career reached a good stopping point. According to Frose, it was because she'd trained a fine replacement.

But from Tesfia's point of view, she thought it was probably because her father had lost his life on a mission in the Outer World. As a result, they were reduced to a family of two, and that was likely why her mother was so strict.

Tesfia had her pride as a member of the nobility, and she'd put in efforts worthy of the name, but no matter how hard she tried, she could count the number of times her mother had gently patted her on the head on one hand. No matter how well she did at the Institute, it was never enough for her mother.

Lately, she'd grown even more harsh with Tesfia. Which was why Tesfia was reluctant to go home for a second time.

"Alright then... I'm off."

"But at least there weren't any problems with your grades when you went home the first time. Right?"

"Yeah, but she asked a lot of questions..."

"I see. We can't talk about Al, after all," Alice said. She'd learned firsthand how strict Frose was. If Frose persistently inquired about Alus, then Alice could imagine Tesfia giving in to her mother.

But in reality, Alus wasn't the only thing for Tesfia to worry about.

Tesfia lightly shook her head, still with a gloomy expression, at her friend's concern. "But you know, that's not all of it... actually, never mind. Okay, I'll see you later!" Acting as cheerful as she could, Tesfia stepped into the Circle Port.

Unlike her first visit home, she didn't need to carry a lot of luggage. All she brought with her this time was her katana. From here on, she'd be

traveling through several cities, and switch to a car partway through the journey. Of course, the power source of that car was artificial mana.

While this kind of vehicle had become commonplace recently, they were still expensive and only the wealthy could afford them.

After going through a number of Circle Ports, Tesfia let out a sigh for the umpteenth time today; she was worrying over what to report to her mother about the incident. The closer she got to the Fable estate, the more of her vitality escaped with her sighs.

At first, she'd been able to cheer herself up by walking through the lively townscapes—but as she neared Babel, that view began to change.

Traveling through another two or three Circle Ports brought her to the northernmost city of the middle-class district, an area lined with luxurious stores. It was, however, where the lower ranks of the wealthy lived.

That said, it still had an abundance of streetlights worthy of a rich neighborhood, illuminating the people walking on the streets at night.

The houses were designed to show off the class and standing of those who lived there, and the gardens were beautifully kept.

The sight of this neighborhood weighed on Tesfia, and the unease she felt turned into a deeper anxiety.

After meeting Alus, she had come to realize how blessed she was, and how carefree her life had been. *I bet most people here haven't even seen a Fiend.* Borrowing Alus' words from that one time, Tesfia thought this to herself.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, young miss."

Suddenly she heard a familiar voice. It startled her, but she'd already expected that he'd be here.

It was the Fable family's longtime butler, Selva Greenus. The old butler with his mild expression, gray hair, and black suit elegantly placed his hand on the car door to open it.

"Thank you for welcoming me, Selva."

This man had served their family since before Tesfia was born, and you would know he was elderly just from looking at his gray hair. Moreover, he had deep wrinkles on his face, a sign of his advanced age and a lifetime of experiences.

He had a tall and lean figure, and his back was always straight, the very image of a refined butler. Though his gray hair showed his age, it only served to accentuate the elegance he exuded.

Selva was once a Magicmaster. Or rather, his position was somewhat special; he could use magic, but he'd never taken up the official title of Magicmaster.

At first, he'd been hired as a guard for the Fable family, but as time passed he received additional duties, until he eventually settled into a butler-like position. By now, guard duty was only a secondary function of his job.

Either way, Selva specialized in fighting people; and though he was past his prime physically, his fighting style using magic remained as polished as ever. This old man was far more capable than a fresh-faced young guard.

"I hear the incident that occurred was disastrous. But fortunately, nothing serious seems to have happened."

Seeing Tesfia hang her head, Selva stroked his beard and gently gazed at her. "Oh, it's quite all right. I am only happy that nothing happened... I am sure you are tired, please come inside."

Getting into the magic car, Tesfia felt herself floating. As the car used mana for power, the system was unbelievably smooth, keeping one from feeling any shaking. Tires were a thing of the past, as thanks to the artificial mana the car's frame hovered slightly above the ground.

In the human domain, there were futuristic inventions and goods mixed in with older technology.

While the appearance of Fiends had led to a decline in human civilization, in the course of researching ways to better fight them, many new technological discoveries had been made. Even so, there was still some old technology put to use, giving the culture a charming mix of old and new. For example, horses were still used for travel by Magicmasters in the Outer World.

"Young miss, on your last visit, I told you that you have become very beautiful. And that your facial features are becoming more lovely as time passes, just like Master Frose..."

"Yeah... but aren't you exaggerating? I only left for the Institute a few months before then."

Leaving aside Tesfia's doubts, Selva, who'd served the Fable family since his youth, smiled. He looked like a grandfather rejoicing in his granddaughter's growth.

Meanwhile, Tesfia seemed to become uneasy the moment her mother's name was mentioned, as her expression looked depressed.

Sensing her feelings, Selva calmly said, "No, even then. I know that very well... the young grow up fast, and Lady Tesfia is maturing in a way that is different from how Master Frose once did. That is why I am truly happy."

Selva flashed her a meaningful smile, adding, "This is a secret from Master Frose," with a wink and a raised finger.

"... Thank you." As expected, Tesfia couldn't hide her anguish from the mature butler. But in the end, all she could give him was a bitter smile in return.

Selva, in the driver's seat, quickly glanced at Tesfia in the rearview mirror. "It is not just me. Master Frose also worries every time something happens."

"Really?!"

In reality, Tesfia and Frose hadn't always been on bad terms. Due to Frose's position in the military, she was simply strict when it came to the topic of magic.

However, that was enough for Tesfia to start thinking negatively about her mother. When she heard something like this from Selva, she couldn't help but be happy, even though it was natural for a mother to worry about her child.

Thanks to that, the oppressive atmosphere in the car began to ease, and Tesfia pushed aside the challenges she was sure to face when she arrived home to a corner of her mind. She'd livened up because of the lighthearted talk with Selva, but she had no way of knowing this was thanks to his mastery of the art of conversation.

Once they were close enough to see the Fable family estate, Selva cleared his throat and changed the topic. "So, young miss, about *that* subject..."

Tesfia's expression suddenly froze.

"Master Frose brought it up because she cares about you. Of course, she is also aware of your reason for enrolling at the Institute..."

"I know! I know... I understand that this is something you can't avoid as nobility! But...!" she said with a trembling voice. All she had to do was become an accomplished Magicmaster and take over as the family head.

Yet... when her mother had brought *that* up on her first visit home, Tesfia knew she wasn't expecting anything from her then.

As these thoughts whirled through her head, the magic car passed through the gates leading to the Fable estate. The magic car had a roadway made especially for it, with trees lining the roadway on either side. It looked quite similar to other estates one would see in the middle and upper-class districts.

That said, the mansion itself was so far away you couldn't see it from the gates. The reason for that was because the Fable family estate was around half the size of the Second Magical Institute.

By the time the mansion, a building almost as big as the Institute's main structure, came into view, there was no longer any conversation taking place in the car. A questionable atmosphere took its place, and it was Tesfia who was responsible for it. Her chest was tingling in pain over having raised her voice at Selva.

Selva stopped the car at the entrance, and the car's back door was soon opened.

Servants lined up to welcome Tesfia back, bowing in perfect order... but that was all.

Frose was nowhere to be seen. She hadn't welcomed Tesfia back the first time, either.

Presenting his hand, Selva called out to Tesfia. "That's why, young miss, I believe it would be best for you to have a heart-to-heart with Master Frose."

"Yeah, thanks. I'm sorry about before, Selva." When Tesfia took his hand and stepped out, a broad smile appeared on Selva's wrinkled face.

Before long, the servants opened the large double doors to the mansion. The dazzling lights within were a nostalgic sight, reminding Tesfia that she'd lived here for years up until just a few months ago.

The mansion had rooms not just for Tesfia and Frose, but also Selva and the steward who had both been with the family for many years. The other servants lived in a separate building connected to the mansion by a corridor.

There were plenty of spare rooms, making the mansion too big, and it was lonely and dead silent at night.

On the east end of the mansion was a hall facing a terrace, which was often used for ballroom parties and the like. It had been used to build a wide social network for the family, as well as to show off their noble status.

Frose's study was on the second floor of the eastern end. Normally, when Tesfia had business to attend to, she didn't head towards the study. But she couldn't get away with it now.

With heavy footsteps, she walked up the stairs and stopped in front of her mother's study, taking a deep breath before knocking on the door. She'd already inquired of Selva as to her mother's whereabouts.

"It's Tesfia. I am back now."

"Come inside."

Normally a servant would open the door, but there weren't any around because this was a meeting between mother and daughter. The trustworthy Selva would sometimes be present, but this time he'd read the mood and was nowhere to be seen.

Tesfia turned the knob carefully so as not to make any noise and stepped inside. She then did her best to silently close the door behind her.

"Welcome back. I hear you went through a lot. You must be tired, so have a seat," Frose said, without even raising her head from her work.

Tesfia stared at her mother for a while. Like herself, her mother had glossy red hair that went down her back. She wore an elegant dress worthy of the head of the Fable family.

Now 37, Frose had retired at a young age. And her beauty had only become further refined as she aged.

There were piles of documents on the large wooden desk, and also a stack of leather folders containing what might be particularly important documents on the side.

And Frose was completely devoted to her work. That, as well as her willpower and beautiful appearance, might have been what her late father was attracted to.

Remembering Selva telling her she was like her mother would have made Tesfia happy right now, were it not for the whirling concern in her chest. With that thought in mind, Tesfia awkwardly sat down on the sofa.

Eventually, Frose seemed to hit a good stopping point in her work, and stood. She headed over to the side table and prepared something to drink, and put down a glass on the table in front of the sofa.

Frose then sat down on the sofa opposite of Tesfia's, taking care not to let her dress wrinkle. "Now, drink."

"Thank you very much."

Tesfia didn't even realize how sweaty her hands were, as she examined her mother's mood. The atmosphere was heavy, as if she was a guest in her own house.

Last time, she'd talked about her grades and how her skills were improving; and while she didn't get her head patted, she was praised for once.

However, the next topic that had been raised made Tesfia freeze up. With a pale expression, she raised her glass to her mouth and remembered about the engagement Frose referred to back then. That conversation had taken place in this very study.

"It's about time you thought about it," Frose had said, staring at her daughter.

Tesfia's mind went blank for a moment, but she'd managed to get out of the situation somehow.

After that, she had absentmindedly gone through her usual mana control training, but forgot to put away the training stick, which her mother then found. She was questioned about the stick, including who she'd gotten it from.

While she didn't reveal Alus' identity, the strange male student she mentioned left a big impression on Frose.

When it looked like Frose would question her closer, the attack on the Institute happened and Tesfia used it as an excuse to escape the house.

So she was forced to find her resolve when her mother called her to return this time. If the engagement was brought up again, she'd dodge the question by saying they should save it for later. And she still had to hide Alus' identity, too.

Frose was a former soldier, and Tesfia didn't know what kind of influence she still had. Moreover, the principal had told her to keep Alus' identity concealed, and Alus himself would likely agree.

And it was Frose who was the first to finally speak in that oppressive atmosphere. "Once again, I hear you went through a lot. To think the Institute would be attacked... but Alice was all right, wasn't she? I've received reports that there were no injuries."

An unexpected opening. Frose must have wanted to avoid cutting right to the chase. But this too was another tricky subject.

Even after she retired—or rather, because she had retired—Frose was making full use of the connections she'd made during her time in the military, and it would be prudent not to underestimate how far her ears reached.

"... Yes." Tesfia's heart was pounding at an alarming rate. Just how much did her mother know?

Alice certainly hadn't been harmed during the attack. But she'd been abducted during it, and due to a series of events, Tesfia had aided in her rescue.

Both of them were injured during that event, but after being healed by the military they no longer had any visible signs that they'd been injured. So technically, she wasn't lying. This was simply something she couldn't speak of, not even to her mother.

However—

"Say, Fia. I heard that students from the Institute were involved in a series of incidents that happened after the attack..."

From the way Frose was speaking, Tesfia assumed that she still hadn't reached the heart of the matter. But there was no way that Tesfia could look straight at Frose, so instead she let her eyes drift away.

She desperately tried to come up with a plausible excuse. "M-Mother. Maybe it was Ms. Felinella who..."

"Ah, it's fine, Fia. I'm not looking to blame anyone. I was only worried that something might have happened to you," Frose cut Tesfia off, as if she'd seen through her.

Even Tesfia understood that her mother wasn't referring to her well-being when she mentioned being worried.

Or maybe she really was worried. If something were to happen to Tesfia, then everything Frose had worked for would be for naught, and it would be a major blow to the Fable family's future.

The tone of voice the mother was using against her child simply screamed 'adult circumstances.'

Frose elegantly brought her glass to her mouth and tilted it back. Even the sound of her drinking made Tesfia's stomach throb.

"So, Fia, you will be staying for the day, won't you?"

"Y-Yes... but I was thinking of returning to the Institute tomorrow."

Despite the fact that she was dealing with her own mother, Tesfia was staring down at her knees. Not only could she not raise her head, she was even scared of seeing Frose's expression.

The eyes staring at her weren't those of the mother who praised her for being second in her year, nor were they the same as the mother who'd praised her improved magical skills.

And Tesfia was scared to confirm that. Knowing that her mother didn't really see *her* was terrifying.

Suddenly, all kinds of memories ran through her head, of her mother in the past, when she would smile so often. Even after Tesfia's father passed away and Frose was alone, she had retired for the sake of her daughter and protected the family.

Just when did the emotion leave her mother's eyes? When had she stopped seeing and speaking to Tesfia as her daughter?

*Ah... it was that time.*

Tesfia recalled when she was young and received special education, and her mother would even train her personally. The result of that was that her skill visibly improved. Her young body was strained to its limits, and she constantly got bruised. Despite that, she respected Frose more than anyone, and wished to become a Magicmaster like her.

Then one time, when she was twelve years old...

Back then, Tesfia had painstakingly acquired Icicle Sword, which was a spell passed down through the Fable family.

When she showed it off to her mother... Frose showed neither joy nor surprise. All she told Tesfia was, "It's only natural that you can do something like that," as if to say *don't waste my time*.

It was then that Tesfia noticed her mother expected more talent out of her—and that she had lost interest in her.

Frose always used to say that those without talent shouldn't strive to become Magicmasters. Which was why she didn't want Tesfia walking down that path.

Yet one day... her mother was sure to acknowledge her.

When Tesfia had been taught magic, her mother always faced her in training seriously. And she'd often praised her...

As long as Tesfia didn't skimp on her efforts, and made something out of herself as a Magicmaster, her mother would surely acknowledge her.

While that thought was going through Tesfia's head...

"Fia, I didn't get to ask about your grades the last time you were back."

Hearing that made an anxious expectation rise inside her.

"You were second in the year. So who was first?" Frose put on a generic smile, one she'd direct at anyone, as her interest was piqued by that person.

Tesfia, unable to hide her disappointment, answered, "Someone who transferred in, who was already a Triple Digit Magicmaster."

She recognized that girl's talents. That girl had even taken over for Alus and given Tesfia training at one point. Anticipating what her mother would say next, Tesfia gulped.

"What is that supposed to mean, Fia?"

As expected, Frose's sharp stare pierced her. Tesfia was unable to fend off that stare, a forceful reminder of how bad she was at handling her mother.

And with the topic shifting away from her, Frose was no longer looking at Tesfia. Proof that her interest lay in people with talent for magic. As she still had connections to the military, it was a topic that Frose wouldn't overlook.

Frose furrowed her brow, not considering Tesfia's feelings at all. "From what noble family are they from? Is it a boy?"

But before Tesfia could answer, her mother continued, "When it comes to male Triples in Alpha, we're talking about Rimfuge's son, or the Womruina family's second son... no, he was still a Quad. But both of them would be stronger than you. However, you don't have any connection to the



Womruina family, besides, they're... So, the Rimfuge family? But I didn't hear that any of their children enrolled at the Institute."

While her mother ruminated over the answer, Tesfia slipped it in. "She's not nobility or a boy, Mother."

"—!!" Frose stared at Tesfia, as if asking for more details.

"It's a girl named Loki Leevahl."

"From the name, she doesn't sound like she's from a renowned noble family. I see, so that girl transferred in."

With Frose's connections, haphazard lies wouldn't work on her. Knowing that she'd be figured out if she lied, Tesfia gave up the information on her own accord to show she wasn't trying to hide anything. "Supposedly she did missions in the Outer World before enrolling."

"I see, so someone like that came in." Frose, of course, realized how abnormal this was.

While it wasn't enough for her, Tesfia was still a four-digit Magicmaster and second in her year. So having a classmate who was a Triple Digit was clearly not normal.

Besides, entering military service after graduating was the norm. Even with exceptions like the extracurricular lesson, almost nobody stepped into the Outer World before entering the Institute.

The only exception would be eccentric families like the Socalents, but even with hands-on training and family circumstances, the daughter from that family was only assisting with missions.

"If I recall, you got that training stick of yours from that... Alus, was it... He was in the same year as you too, right?"

Tesfia was visibly shaken when her mother mentioned Alus by name. She wasn't supposed to have remembered it, yet Frose spoke it aloud with conviction.

Trying to dodge the question in a half-hearted manner wouldn't work. "Y-Yes! But Alus' grades are only average..." she blurted out, without even being asked. But she had no way of realizing how unnatural she sounded, now that she was cornered.

"I see. I understand. Thank you for letting me know, Fia." Frose's refined smile was so perfect that only her daughter would have been able to see through it.

And Tesfia's ingrained instincts told her that her mother's smile was completely hollow.

Then, as if their business was finished, Frose stood up and returned to her desk as if changing gears, the discussion over for her.

Tesfia realized their mother and daughter meeting was done. "Mother, excuse me."

"Yes. Let's have dinner together. I'll have Selva call for you later."

Tesfia squeezed out a powerless "Yes" and left the room. She was careful when closing the door, but her mind was blank aside from that.

Once in the hallway, she walked to her room, her head hanging low.

Keeping up appearances as a noble was a shackle that took precedence over the familial bond between Tesfia and Frose. When Tesfia was young she hadn't hated the idea of this; instead, she'd taken pride in it and put in what effort she could.

But just where had it gone wrong?

While Tesfia took steady steps towards her goal, at some point she'd stopped being the daughter that Frose wanted.

"Young miss..."

The sudden voice brought her back to reality. And she noticed that Selva was looking at her with a worried expression.

When Tesfia timidly glanced his way, Selva gave her a particularly gentle smile. "It's no good brooding over things too hard. Master Frose always has you in mind. The reason she doesn't let it show is because of her long stay in the military."

"Yes. I know. I know that Mother is always busy and worries over me."

But despite knowing this, she couldn't help but think, *That's because she needs me, isn't it?*

As nobility, they had to serve the country. With that duty in mind, the Fable family built up their current status by adhering to social rules and restrictions.

The children of the noble families joined the military to serve as role models for the people. And it was also true that the military needed their power.

The Fable family received favors worthy of their contributions. It would be impossible for them to maintain their vast land, mansion, and the finances necessary for their servants without their family name and glory. Because of that, Tesfia had to be the next head.

However, she refused to put the sorrow welling up in her into words. Doing that would be like rejecting the burden and pride as a noble that she'd inherited.

The sense of loss she felt dug a deep hole in her heart, making her want to scream out loud. That hole had been slowly growing since she was young, and still hadn't been filled. Her memories of her mother back then, which should have filled that hole, were a haze by now.

A feeling of helplessness washed over Tesfia, with only the elderly butler gazing at her the same as always. With affection, with nostalgia...

"Indeed, the problem the young miss is carrying might be too heavy for this butler to help carry. But as an old man who has served since the past generation..." Selva stared out the window with a distant look, as if remembering something. "I believe it is important that you overcome your hesitation and fear, and speak directly to Master Frose. That is also something that she was unable to do herself."

"You mean... my mother?" Tesfia's eyes opened wide. She couldn't imagine her mother being unable to do anything.

"When Master Frose was the young miss' age, sobbing could be heard from her room every night... Master Frose has always held it in. And she is trying to guide you down that same path. Or rather, that is the only path that she is aware of."

The times weren't always as peaceful as they were now. Things far more bloody than simple power struggles had run rampant in what little was left of the human realm. Neither making choices nor fulfilling wishes... not even worrying was allowed. All that could be done was to follow the path laid down for you. Perhaps that was the work of the nobility born at that time.

Tesfia didn't know much about how things were back then... and she felt perhaps that she didn't know that much about her mother either.

"Selva?" Tesfia saw the butler's eyes were tearing up a little. Her heart was moved, and she was unable to keep herself from calling out to him.

"Pardon me, I have said too much."

"Really. If Mother heard you, she wouldn't speak to you for a week."

"That would be problematic," Selva said with a small smile, and a raised finger in front of his lips.

Tesfia responded with a nod and a smile in kind. By now, the feelings of melancholy hovering over her had vanished. "Thank you, Selva. I'll try speaking with Mother."

"And I will support you from the shadows. So what are your plans for now, young miss?"

"Yes, I think I'll do some training in the field out back."

"Understood. Then I will come calling once dinner is prepared."

All Tesfia had to do was have her mother acknowledge her little by little. As long as there was enough time for that, there wouldn't be any problems, and her mother would be sure to change her mind.

After changing her clothes in her room, Tesfia headed for the training grounds before the sun set.

They had been designed just for Tesfia. While it wasn't as impressive as the Institute's facilities, it had been split into multiple smaller areas with different uses.

Right now she was in what was just empty space, meant for practicing magic.

Aside from this area, there was also a swordsmanship dojo, as well as a facility made for training the body for live combat.

The training grounds she currently occupied spanned 50 meters in every direction. The walls were made out of a material that absorbed mana, the same used by the military.

In front of her were targets that were resistant to impacts, and white lines were drawn on the ground. They were remnants from training she did in her youth, and were fading out due to the aftereffects of spells and her stepping on them. That was because she had cast spells here countless times.

First, she stood in the center and calmed herself. After exhaling, she drew her katana.

The last time she was home, she'd shown the results of her magic to her mother and Selva. Her magic showed improvement that exceeded Frose's expectations.

Tesfia was always nervous in front of her mother, and had a hard time dealing with her, so she'd braced herself for what would be a harsh evaluation... that actually turned out to be a reasonable one. Which was why she'd felt tears welling up when her mother had praised her last time. To her, it was only natural to show her mother her grades and to have her magic tested.

In fact, she'd been the one that asked to enroll into the Institute. She wanted to live the school life alongside Alice, as well as to acquire a rank worthy of nobility.

Frose hadn't seen any point in having her daughter attend the Institute, which was why Tesfia would never have ended up there if she hadn't done something herself.

But now she was able to practice her magic to her heart's content. Deep down inside, she knew that she would have to prove her worth through her own refined skills.

If she was able to act smarter as a young noblewoman, then she might not have to carry this kind of anxiety with her. But Tesfia wasn't good at living up to the expectations placed on her to follow a path laid down for her by someone else... which was why she chose the other option available to her—to show her worth through her skills as a Magicmaster.

Tesfia put all her strength into her arms as if to shake off her hesitation and conflict. Her straightforward will flowed into the katana.

The magic formula engraved on the surface of the blade began to glow in response.

\* \* \*

With her daughter out of the room, Frose's study was as quiet as always.

However, the atmosphere wasn't tranquil, but rather something more solemn. The reason for that was none other than Frose herself, who was silently absorbed in an investigation.

She used every single connection in the Fable family's network to focus on her task, and yet...

"It's no use..." she suddenly mumbled. Having tried all possible means, she leaned back in her chair and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Please take care not to overtire yourself," Selva said, as he put down a chilled glass on the edge of the desk.

With a simple thanks, Frose brought the glass to her mouth. "Selva, what do you think? After all this searching, I can only find this small bit of information on this Loki girl. But I've only been able to come up with a hastily thrown together profile from the entrance ceremony on the other student who's supposedly been teaching Fia... this Alus person."

The only figure on the screen was a silver-haired girl. The more Frose gazed at her, the more something felt wrong.

"That is strange..." Selva said.

"...To think she knows the Outer World at her age," Frose mused.

Selva stared at the girl on the screen with complicated emotions whirling in his mind. Perhaps she reminded him of Tesfia.

But Frose harbored more confusion and resentment than anything. She pressed her nail against her lip and read through the text detailing the girl's information. "This is what little they have to show for that mistaken program of educating orphans for the sake of inexpensive fighting power," she spat out in contempt.

When Frose was in the military, command quietly put in place what they called a 'protective measure', which was taking the children of Magicmasters into custody if they lost their parents.

The children were given two choices: one was to live life in an orphanage, the other was to take part in a military program to become a Magicmaster.

But there was no real choice to make. Practically all Magicmaster deaths were due to combat against Fiends. Those who put the protective measure into action used that truth to put pressure on the children.

Whispering into their ears, appealing to their anger and grief. Telling them how Fiends had killed their parents, and that they would help them to get strong enough to avenge them if they wanted to.

The result of this program was that all the children in the first phase had been wiped out on their first and only mission to the Outer World. That group had even included children below the age of ten.

Frose held back her feelings of regret and stopped herself from saying anything more.

"And someone like this has that kind of ranking... how frightening."

"Yes," Frose said. "She must have some talents, but surely she's had to overcome countless brushes with death... The biggest problem with the Magicmaster training program was the use of children who were still mentally immature. The moment they decided on that was the moment their salvation lost all meaning. It's not a matter of whether they make excellent Magicmasters or not. To be frank, I think there's a one in a million chance of someone managing to adapt to that environment."

Frose continued with her displeasure on full display, and turned off the display screen. "They won't be able to hold on just by fanning their flames of revenge... especially not at the frontlines in battle against Fiends."

"That aside, this person is Lady Tesfia's friend, so why not invite her over to meet her?"

Normally that proposal was very likely to be accepted. Tesfia had been made to bring Alice over multiple times, after all.

However... "No, I'm more interested in *him*," Frose said, and tapped some keys.

This brought up the profile of a certain Alus Reigin.

“Ah—the original owner of the training stick that Lady Tesfia brought back,” Selva said.

“That’s part of it, of course, but I’m more interested in the fact that I can’t find any more information on this Alus, and how superficial his current student profile is.”

“Oh, that’s peculiar.”

VIPs of foreign nations and secret information on high-ranking Magicmasters were one thing, but it was unthinkable for the Fable family information network to not be able to glean any information on a normal student.

Frose said, “And he’s at the Institute that is under Sisty’s management... things have taken a strange turn.”

There were too many unexplained elements for just some son of a noble family to enroll into the Institute with only average grades, and interfere with her daughter’s training.

Frose stood up and left the room, as if on her way to confirm one of her suspicions. Selva, of course, followed behind her.

She headed for the opposite side of the mansion. Passing by the central staircase, she made her way to the balcony.

The grounds were in full view from here. And Frose’s eyes were set on a single spot of her vast land—the training grounds where Tesfia was practicing her magic.

“I’ll be honest, I do acknowledge that she’s grown tremendously in the short time she’s been at the Institute,” she said, while observing Tesfia in action. But her expression remained unchanged as always.

While Frose claimed to acknowledge her daughter’s growth, she knew that kind of growth would be of no use whatsoever. She only allowed Tesfia’s admission into the Institute because she had pleaded with her. To Frose, it was only intended to be a brief respite before she had Tesfia study to become the next head of the family.

Grades and improvements in magic came after that, and if Tesfia made mistakes, Frose had even considered using them as an excuse to make her quit the Institute.

But Tesfia had reasonable results. Frose had feared that if she attended the Institute without the bare minimum of talent for magic, she’d only be dragging the family name through the mud. However, her daughter’s efforts had brushed away those doubts.

“I am of the same opinion. The young miss’ growth is truly astounding. However, that is why...”

Even without any favoritism (not that Frose showed any), Tesfia had improved considerably. That much could be gleaned just from watching her manifest the magic passed down through the Fable family, Icicle Sword.

The molding of the ice sword and the strength of its construction changed depending on the user’s experience and development. It had lost

its almost artistic beauty from before, but now it was sharpened to more easily cut its enemy, and the blade itself was longer. It was now more optimized for fighting Fiends, marking it as completely different from how it was before she enrolled at the Institute.

But that was why Frose's suspicions grew.

Tesfia focused on creating the sword of ice, completely unaware that she was being observed from the balcony far away.

Once the sword made its full appearance, Frose narrowed her eyes. "It's changed again. A sharper... and more deadly shape."

The long blade was chilly, hard, sharp and more suited to live combat, as if it was a condensation of rationality, transforming it into a sword capable of reaping lives in the quickest way possible. Within less than a month, Tesfia had grown even more.

Normally that would be something to rejoice over. But according to the information Frose had gotten her hands on, some of the students had been caught up in the incident at the Institute. Tesfia's and Alice's names were brought up in regards to that.

She hadn't seriously cornered her daughter yet, but Frose knew the truth just from her attitude. Which was why she could naturally understand what had happened to her daughter during that short period of time.

Meanwhile, Selva said in admiration, "She must have studied very hard. With her experience showing so honestly in her magic... the young miss must have made her way through quite some hardships."

Tesfia's growth moved him, but at the same time he felt a tinge of loneliness as well. The girl before him now was very different from the younger Tesfia that he'd known.

Selva exhaled with a sigh, showing the feelings only someone elderly would feel when watching a young sapling grow before their eyes.

"That's true, but there's no need for her to learn everything. Stepping into the Outer World as a Magicmaster isn't the only way a noble can gain influence in the military... maybe it's about time to call it quits."

Frose did hesitate for a moment. But she'd already reached the conclusion that it was time for her daughter to make a choice. She knew that reality was harsh, and there were just some things that normal talent and effort wouldn't be able to overcome.

Because she knew the Outer World, Frose could anticipate Tesfia's future and plan for it. It was due to her ability to envision years and decades into the future that a decision had to be made now.

Just as she had done in the past...

Frose could see the changes in Tesfia's magic. Perhaps the extracurricular lesson had caused it, or maybe it was because she'd gotten caught up in a military mission.

Either way, that alone wasn't enough. The existence of something linking the Outer World and the Inner World—the human world within the

barrier—had to have been necessary for her magic to transform like that. If not, she wouldn't have had this kind of growth spurt in such a short time.

With a quiet expression that understood everything, Frose stared at the transient scene before her. The young sprout was seeing a fleeting dream and was trying to follow it as directly as possible.

Selva's lips trembled behind Frose. He didn't want to think that Frose's cold decision was inevitable. But no matter what she said, she was Tesfia's mother. He cast his eyes down, realizing he was being impertinent, before saying, "Would that really be in the young miss' best interests?"

"Selva, you should know this too. This is for Fia's sake, and the Fable family's sake. She might oppose it, but she doesn't need to understand it yet."

Selva said nothing. To this elderly butler who'd known Tesfia since she was a baby, she wasn't just someone he was loyal to, but also something like a granddaughter.

If this were just a normal affluent family, it might have been forgiven. But this was the Fable family, and personal emotions were not allowed. The current Fable family was built on generations of proud obligations and noble compensation.

Selva took a step backwards and bowed to apologize for complaining to the current head of the family.

Frose glanced his way, with no strong feelings in particular, and muttered, "That said, I need to find out what happened with her first."

Selva finished dinner preparations, and called for Tesfia in the training grounds after the sun had set and the streetlights had come on.

Before dinner, Tesfia headed to her room first. Her room was on the second floor, up the central stairs and to the right.

Because the servants lived in another building, the mansion had plenty of spare rooms. There were easily more than ten rooms just on the right-hand side of the mansion. There was a library, a parlor, the room the chamberlains had used for many years, and more.

Opening the door, Tesfia got her change of clothes ready, and headed into the shower. That was partly to wash off the sweat she'd worked up, but also because appropriate attire was required when having dinner with her mother.

She wouldn't receive any complaints for wearing casual clothing, but, maybe to look more like her mother's daughter, Tesfia chose a dress, something she usually didn't have a chance to wear at the Institute.

After she finished her shower, the silence she normally never paid any attention to stood out more than ever.

Her dorm room was more cramped, but life with Alice as her roommate was fun, and she certainly didn't feel as lonely there as this room made her feel.



As if waiting for this time, there was a knock on the door and several maids appeared. The maids began to dry her hair and trim her nails.

Tesfia tried to refuse, saying that they didn't need to go so far, but the maids seemed to enjoy being able to care for her for the first time in a while. Seeing their expressions, Tesfia couldn't refuse them, and ended up entrusting herself to them.

And since this wasn't a dinner party with guests, her dress was just modest enough to be worn inside the mansion.

Before Selva could call for her again, Tesfia headed for the dining hall as the maids saw her off.

Since those who served in the mansion also ate their meals here, the hall was rather large.

Frose and Selva were already waiting when Tesfia arrived. Tesfia bowed slightly before taking her seat. With that, the dinner began.

As far as Tesfia remembered, they usually didn't hold discussions about things while eating. However, Frose went against her expectations and started to speak, while strictly observing her manners.

"So, Fia, what kind of relationship do you have with this Ms. Loki who's at the top of your year?"

This was something Tesfia had been expecting, and she put her fork back down. Like she'd planned ahead of time, she was going to admit to being acquainted with her, but say that they weren't close. "Ms. Loki and I are in the same class. That's all."

It was smarter not to hide something that could be found out with a little research. Or she might end up putting herself in a worse position later.

"Oh, I see. By the way, what kind of affinity does she have?"

Tesfia wondered how deep her mother's questioning was going to go. But, that said, if she wanted to, she could find out most things if she so pleased. "It appears that she has an affinity for the lightning attribute."

"How unusual."

"Really? I don't think there are any others with an affinity for it in the same year."

When Frose stared at Tesfia with a reproachful glance at her lack of knowledge, Tesfia realized her blunder.

Her lack of study put Frose in a bad mood, but because it was dinner time, Frose stopped herself there. Instead of reprimanding her, she began explaining in an exasperated tone, "Listen closely. The lightning attribute needs to convert mana to create the power of lightning. That's not something you can pick up in a day or two just because you have an affinity for it... and it's not until you've mastered its difficult spells that you can truly say you have an affinity for it."

"I see."

Frose ignored Tesfia's depressed tone and continued, "Fia, that's not a reason for you to give up. Or do you perhaps have some other reason?"

Tesfia quickly realized that she was talking about her ranking at the Institute. Cold sweat ran down her spine as she sat straight up in her seat in surprise.

Her face twitched slightly as she tried to make sure that her relationship with Loki remained unknown, all the while remembering the tragedy that happened when Alice had been invited to the mansion...

For some reason, Alice had ended up having to show her magic, and Frose being a strict teacher resulted in her working over not only Tesfia, but Alice as well. If Frose got her hands on Loki, things would definitely take a turn for the worse. And from the sound of it, it'd be best to avoid the topic of Alus being brought up any further.

If she couldn't disobey her mother, the least she could do was not dig her own grave. "Yes, I will be more diligent."

"... Well, no matter. It is true that you've grown as a Magicmaster." Her mother's indifferent words even sounded robotic. "But this Ms. Loki does pique my interest."

Tesfia's shoulders trembled again. She remembered that her mother had said the same thing about Alice. After this, she would come up with some excuse to invite Loki to the mansion. Before long, Frose would make a suggestion that Tesfia couldn't refuse.

After a quick glance, she could see the interest in her mother's eyes. She'd only been spared the pursuit for a moment, as further difficulties awaited Tesfia. Having expected as much, Tesfia was about to give up when the main dish was brought in.

When Tesfia realized that Selva had chosen the timing to interrupt their discussion, she felt like the butler was on her side.

Of course, there was no way that this would go unnoticed by Frose. That much was clear by the way she sighed.

After that, neither of them opened their mouths except to bring the tender meat to their lips.

Selva opened the door for Tesfia when she left the dining hall, and she silently thanked him with her eyes. The dinner that Selva had made himself for the first time in a while had been delicious. Though it would've been even better if she could have enjoyed the taste without anguish, but nothing would come from saying that now.

With Tesfia gone from the dining hall, Frose took a sip of tea. "You're the same as always."

Since they saw each other every day, this statement might sound a little strange. Of course, the butler was able to pick up on what she was implying. "Was I perhaps being too considerate of your first meal together, just the two of you, in such a long time?"

"Hm, well, that's fine. You're as sweet on her as always," Frose muttered, and took another sip.

When Tesfia returned to her room, all the tension built up inside of her drained away, and she flopped down on top of her bed. But she couldn't go to sleep just yet. Her mother had told her to come back later, as Tesfia stepped out of the dining hall.

This time it would most likely be about Loki, or maybe Alus.

However, Tesfia was no longer just a child afraid of her mother. Like Selva said, she needed to put her own intentions into words. The time for that discussion was now.

If she could persuade her mother, she would open a path towards the future, and continue her life at the Institute.

Tesfia sat up on her bed, and breathed deeply. All the while feeling how it'd been so long since she'd spoken to her mother with her own words.

On the way to her mother's study, Tesfia didn't see Selva or any of the servants.

Once at the door, she began pondering how she should start the discussion. But she'd already decided what her first words would be, in her room. "Mother, I have something to talk about as well," she'd say with resolution, to show her own will. Just being able to say those words would require a great deal of courage from her.

Bracing herself, she knocked on the door.

The force behind her knock wasn't so much a display of strong will, as much as it was scolding herself for starting to get faint of heart, and to create a situation where she couldn't turn back. She wasn't going to come up with a good reason or excuse by thinking. So she decided to at least preserve her motivation, putting her trust in herself.

But a few seconds after entering the room, that determination and resolution had already disappeared from Tesfia's face.

The first thing her mother said was—

"Fia, choose from one of these."

"—?!"

Thrust in front of her were several leather-covered folders, all of which had been piled up on her desk earlier today.

Frose picked one of the dozen or so folders and opened it up for Tesfia to take a look. The cover was thick, but inside was a simple two-page spread.

"—!!!" The moment Tesfia saw it, she was rendered speechless, and her eyes shot wide open.





What she saw was a document made of parchment. It detailed a family tree and personal history. It was a marriage proposal. On one side of the folder was a photograph, with the detailed information and such on the other side.

“Mother!!”

Indeed, as nobility, she’d been prepared to have to get married young, but Tesfia felt the most resentment over not getting to choose her own partner.

Frose would suggest an engagement every now and then, but Tesfia had assumed she meant a little later on in life. Even then, she figured she’d just persuade her once that moment came.

So having her mother’s intentions shoved at her like this, along with her attitude that wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer, Tesfia understood that she wasn’t even going to be given a chance to discuss it.

“You are already 16. I won’t push you to get married yet, but the sooner you get engaged, the better.” Her mother said it like it was the most natural thing in the world. Her expression was more cool-headed and callous than it was before.

“But I want to make a name...”

*Make a name for myself as a Magicmaster, secure my own position, and choose my own partner like you did... is what she wanted to say before she was cut off.*

“When I was your age, I was already engaged to your father. If you want to make a name for yourself, it won’t be too late to do so after you graduate and have children.” Frose must have gone down the same path herself, as there was no hesitation in her words. “You’re still in high demand, so make your choice before something unexpected happens. I’ve picked out some candidates.”

Tesfia bit her lip. Being forced to make a decision narrowed down for her by someone else was not the same as choosing for oneself.

“Engagement...”

The fate of nobles had suddenly befallen her. In Tesfia’s mind, that fate was a blade threatening to cut down her very heart.

“Now, look them over.” Their ranking as Magicmasters was emphasized on the profiles, as was their affinities, the spells in which they specialized, and the social ranking they were likely to reach within their lifetimes.

At first the text was clear, but soon the words began to blur as Tesfia teared up. Unable to hold them back any longer, drops fell down and stained the profiles.

It wasn’t like she’d never thought about marriage, but she still had seen it as something far in the distance, or at the very least with her ideal partner that she’d find herself. She imagined that that would be the greatest happiness.

So she desperately told herself that the searing pain in her chest was because she realized that her wish would never come true.

She wanted to believe that it wasn't because her mother had turned her back on her future as a Magicmaster.

However...

*Wrong wrong wrong wrong...* She didn't know what he would look like, but she believed she would meet her ideal partner one day.

Tesfia couldn't take it anymore and stormed out of her mother's study. She didn't remember what she'd done with the pile of folders, nor did she have the composure to stop and think about it.

With Tesfia running away, Frose stared into the empty space beyond the door with a cold gaze.

That's when Selva, carrying tea, came in and closed it. "Master Frose, so you told the young miss."

"Yes, but I didn't think she'd take it that badly."

"But of course." Selva expertly poured some tea, and quietly put it down before Frose.

"However, this isn't something that can be helped." Frose's belief that nobility should marry young and have children early to protect their family name wouldn't change. Even those with talent ran the risk of being ostracized within noble society if they missed their chance. Nobles who didn't marry—were seen as abandoning their names. That was something Frose couldn't overlook, which was why she'd picked prime candidates for her daughter out of consideration for her.

It was ironic that what Frose thought was the best course of action was the opposite of Tesfia's.

"... The young miss looked very much like a young Master Frose."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"I felt a little bad for her. Did you talk things over with the young miss?"

"There's no need for that. Fia won't understand right now no matter how much I explain it. But to think you've mellowed this much, Selva."

Selva brushed off her remark with a small chuckle.

"I did compromise quite a bit for her sake, you know."

"Perhaps that was what was so wrong." Selva picked up the folders that had been scattered across the floor. Only he realized the tragic reason for why this mother and daughter weren't seeing eye to eye.

Nobility getting married to protect the family name was fate, in a sense. It was only inevitable that Frose, as the current head of the family, would choose some "prime candidates."

But Frose didn't think there was any deception involved on her part. In fact, she thought it to be a kindness. These were actions taken with Tesfia's best interests in mind.

While Selva realized this, he couldn't say it out loud. It was a clear line that he couldn't cross as a butler. However, he couldn't help but notice that

this situation was the same as the circumstances in which a young Frose had once found herself.

At the time, Selva was also young, and he hadn't been able to do anything to save Frose. So perhaps he wasn't in a place to judge.

Ever since the day he decided to serve and protect the Fable family, Selva had never made a mistake when it came to his order of priorities. Stepping outside his boundaries wouldn't amount to anything other than hurting himself. But even so, the situation and circumstances were different now.

With a sigh, he put down the folders of fiancé candidates on the desk.

Frose shook her head, as if she wasn't concerned with the elderly butler's worries. No, it wasn't that she wasn't concerned. In her mind, it was already decided. "She doesn't have much time. It might have been too soon for her, but she'll need to make up her mind during her stay."

"Is that so." Selva didn't raise any objections, but as the family butler he wanted to give his frank advice. "... Not everything is the same as before. The young miss has led a life in a different time from Master Frose. Why not at least speak to her, not as the head of the family, but as her mother?"

"... As her mother? That's what I've been doing all along."

The unusual remark from the loyal butler seemed to spark something. She'd answered plainly, but Selva shook his head as he sensed her stubborn side wavering somewhat. "... Master Frose, if you are going to talk to the young lady, I believe you should wait until she has calmed down a little more."

"... That's true. She needs time to sort things out." Frose glanced at the folders of fiancé candidates, and rested her chin on her hand while closing her eyes.

To her, born as nobility, the ideal was to maintain a stable social standing and preserve the Fable name. She wished the same thing for her daughter even now.

However... due to Selva's words, she began feeling a slight hesitation.

\* \* \*

The girl wiped at her blurred sight with her fingers. Yet tears of sorrow continued to overflow.

Having run out of Frose's study, Tesfia made her way straight to her own room. The sound of the door slamming shut echoed out, filling her with a helpless feeling.

She'd thrown herself on her bed without even turning the lights on, her mind whirling.

*I knew marriage was inevitable.*

However, she felt a stinging pain like she'd been abandoned.

She'd set a goal of earning a remarkable ranking as a Magicmaster, so she was hurt when her mother ignored that in favor of finding her a fiancé. It seemed that her mother had given up on her talent as a Magicmaster.



To Tesfia, a fiancé could come later. She'd rather become a full-fledged Magicmaster and produce results. It was the path she'd thought of for herself, but now it had suddenly been cut short. Forcibly, at that, by her powerful mother.

Lying down, with her eyes closed, her negative thoughts continued running wild, all she could see were the worst outcomes and futures for herself.

She questioned herself, and when her thoughts reached a standstill, she raised her head and shook it from side to side. *Do I have to give up? No, I can't! That's the one thing I can't do...*

Devastated, and trying to keep from thinking anymore, Tesfia covered herself in her quilt and created her own little personal space. If she didn't, she felt like even what little resistance she had left would abandon her. She had to continue to reject it or she'd be swallowed up by it. She was scared that she would give in and accept the current situation.

Her eyes were red from crying, and she closed her trembling lips as she curled up in a ball on her bed.

Thinking about it, it might have been a selfish objection. She couldn't accept it, yet she didn't have the courage to leave the house and her mother.

No, she believed that her mother would come to understand. Like Selva said, she could speak with her mother and make her understand what she wanted, and then...

Tesfia finally understood that this was just her being naïve.

As she pressed her tears into her pillow, she thought back to her memories at the Institute to try and distract herself from reality. She'd been made to realize she was immature in every way as a Magicmaster, but those days were still satisfying. She'd received guidance from Alus, and was finally starting to see improvement.

Meanwhile, she also understood that she only looked like a child throwing a tantrum from Frose's point of view.

But she could feel her own growth, which was why it was so painful... she wanted to think and choose for herself.

She now knew that her proclamation of wanting to become a great Magicmaster was just her talking big. Up until now, she'd never known what a real Magicmaster was like, so she couldn't deny that it had been nonsense.

But now she would never say that being a Magicmaster was a noble job. She'd seen a real Magicmaster up close after all...

Which was why she wanted to believe in her own possibilities. She had a foundation now to do so. He'd seen the potential within her and acknowledged it.

In that case...

The thoughts in her head gradually turned into a firm determination. So by the time she slowly raised her head from the pillow, there were no longer any tears in her swollen eyes.

Indeed, she wouldn't find true happiness if she held back.

Tesfia sat up on her bed, and forcefully wiped her wet cheeks.

Suddenly, an orderly knock came on the door. Taken aback by the suddenness, she was unable to react.

"Fia, I'm coming in."

The sound of the doorknob moving reached her ears, and the light from the hallway came spilling in.

"—!!"

With a sigh, Frose pressed the button next to the door to turn on the lights. She cast her head down for a moment when she saw her daughter's swollen red eyes, but in the next second she put on a calm smile.

That was because she could see a strong will ready to face the situation in her daughter's face. These were no longer the weak eyes of a girl who broke down crying.

"Mother! ...I'm sorry," Tesfia apologized for not answering her mother's knock. Of course, her words might hold more meaning behind them, considering what she would say next.

"I don't mind. That aside, let us talk a little."

Frose seemed to be wondering how to begin. She awkwardly sat down on the bed next to Tesfia. Though she was the one who brought it up, she didn't speak right away as she looked around the room like it was her first time here.

And that was only natural. It had been years since she last came to Tesfia's room.

"How strange. You've grown this big, yet it feels like it's the first time I've come to your room..." Frose sighed. "In the end, it's just as Selva said." She spoke her mind, convinced now of something. "Perhaps this is what I deserve for focusing on work and leaving so much up to the servants."

Tesfia listened, nervous, but was unable to bear it any longer as she raised her voice. "That's because you were doing your best to protect the family... and to raise me." Her voice tapered off at the end.

She didn't have many memories of her mother, but she'd concluded to herself that it was inevitable. That was why Tesfia had an attachment to her mother and the Fable family that she'd protected. It wasn't something she could take lightly.

However, her desire to treasure her own way of life was another matter.

Despite sitting next to one another, they didn't look at each other. Tesfia didn't know what her mother was gazing at, or what she was thinking.

And after a short silence, Frose suddenly asked, "Fia, do you hate the idea of being engaged to someone right away?"

"... Yes!!" Even if it was a sudden question, her answer was immediate.

"But as nobility, you understand that you need to quickly pick someone for marriage, don't you?"

Tesfia knew that, and she lightly bit her lip to hold back her bitter emotions, and nodded. "Mother, I... I want to achieve greatness as a Magicmaster, and become just like you. Of course, I don't think it's okay to bring an end to the Fable family's name and history. That's why I will manage to do both."

Her ideals ignored the cruelty of reality, and had a purity that Frose didn't have. Or rather, a purity she'd lost long ago.

Realizing that, Frose thought to herself that Selva was right. Her daughter was quite different from her.

No, she'd changed herself for the sake of the family, thinking back, and Tesfia was one of the few absolute joys she'd had in her life. And this was the first time she'd seen her daughter try so desperately to have her own way.

Frose let out another sigh, and turned to face Tesfia. "I understand. I was going to have you choose a fiancé during your stay, but we can wait and see for the moment."

She hadn't approved of anything. And she definitely had some calculating motives as well.

In reality, Tesfia had a bad feeling about the whole 'wait and see' approach. In other words, this was nothing more than a compromise. The vagueness of the term was the reason why she was still stiff with nervousness.

Seeing that obvious doubt on Tesfia's face, Frose smiled and revealed what she was thinking. "Fia, it's not like I don't believe in you, but if you choose the path of a Magicmaster, you'll need to hold your own in a fierce competition to protect our pride as nobles. As someone who bears the Fable name, ending your career amongst the lower ranks is not acceptable. And while you're doing that, you'll lose time that could be otherwise spent in marriage. In order for me to put this on hold, you need to give me a basis to believe in you."

"Basis..." Tesfia mused over it in her mind, but she didn't know how her future would turn out either. Would she be able to provide it with something other than her grades at the moment? If the determination to do so would suffice, she could just say the same as before.

Then, Frose suggested something to Tesfia, who was hesitating for a moment. "Alus Reigin..."

"—?!"

Tesfia's heart skipped a beat when she heard his name. Her complicated feelings for him aside, she'd been told by the Institute to keep quiet about him. And it was clear that this was also the military's wish as well.

Her body stiffened up as she braced herself for this topic. She couldn't afford to leak his secret. And considering his ranking, she had to be careful, especially since it was her mother talking about him. She had to avoid

letting even the tiniest bit of information slip. Tesfia closed her lips tight, so they wouldn't open by accident.

That's when Frose raised a single one of her slender fingers. "About this classmate of yours, Mr. Alus... I would like to meet him. It is the truth that your skills as a Magicmaster have markedly improved in a short period of time. This isn't an exaggeration either..."

"W-Wait a minute, Mother!"

"Of course, I'm not trying to belittle your efforts. So considering that and a meeting with him, I will reconsider having you get engaged right now."

"T-That's..."

Frose had been in charge of training fresh recruits in the past. That's why she didn't think Tesfia's 'classmate' and the owner of that training stick who had trained her up in such a short time was anyone normal.

While she'd left the military, she still had connections, and she had an interest in magic and the technology around it, so she would love a meeting with him. It appeared that he was still a student, but he might be a valuable asset to the future of Alpha.

And considering Alus' actual achievements and contributions, she was right on the mark.

"Remember, I might have said that marriage could be delayed for later, but as your mother I'd like it if you decided on a fiancé."

"... I understand."

Tesfia had no other choice but to accept. It was her last remaining hope and the only way to—albeit temporarily—avoid the question of engagement. If the matter of engagement was pushed any further, her life at the Institute would be at stake. Frose might even have her drop out altogether.

"Then let us invite Mr. Alus here. And while we're at it, why not have Ms. Loki come over too, Fia."

"Mother... I don't think Alus Reigin will accept an invitation. He, uhm, doesn't think too highly of nobility... o-of course, I think that's because of his own prejudice though!" Tesfia timidly said, while carefully observing her mother.

To be honest, she wanted to keep her from meeting Alus. Considering their personalities, she started getting depressed just imagining what would happen.

There was also the precedent of Alice. Frose had a tendency to obsess over those she deemed to have talent. There'd definitely be a quarrel. If she didn't at least consult with him ahead of time, something terrible would happen. Of course, there was no guarantee he'd agree to meet with Frose.

"Oh, so he dislikes nobility. Well, there are people like that too. There are, after all, those who abuse their position to protect vested interests. But that's why there are the upper levels of nobility who are in charge of managing them. Don't you think it would be a good opportunity for him to learn that?"

"B-But he has his own circumstances. I'm sure he can't come right away..."

"Well, I suppose it would be too impolite to coerce him into doing something he doesn't want to on the first meeting."

Frose looked to be relenting. While she knew that he wasn't nobility, learning that he wasn't a big fan of nobles must have been unexpected.

Of course, if he had a noble lineage, then Frose would have been able to use her connections to get information on him, and this situation would never have occurred to begin with.

In any case, Tesfia managed to escape her predicament. Frose was a former military woman, and was Alus' senior in a sense. If they were just going to be talking a little, it might work out somehow. That said, she'd still need to bow and beg him.

*If I stand in to mediate and have him talk with Mother just a little...*

If she used her license to call him, she could discuss things with him in advance, and she could also eavesdrop in on the call. "I understand, I'll talk to Al..."

Having relaxed her guard after escaping her crisis, Tesfia accidentally let something slip that Frose didn't miss.

"Oh, Al, is it? If you're calling him by a nickname, you must get along... now, what kind of relationship do you have?"

By the time Tesfia realized it, her mother already had a meaningful smile on her face. It was the kind of smile she couldn't deal with, though to outsiders it would look like a normal discussion between mother and daughter.

She stared off in another direction, but she could feel her mother's relentless pressure send chills down her back.

"This 'Al' of yours, Alus Reigin, is someone I'm having a hard time getting a read on. I am very interested in him. So, Fia, let me see him when it suits him. I'll decide on things once I see him for myself, as well as how he views your room for growth and talent."

"I understand."

*Seeing her daughter meekly nod, Frose smiled wryly and made a mental note. You look like you'd run out of the mansion at any moment if I'd decided otherwise.*

Considering Tesfia's resolve, Frose felt like she might have been too rash in rushing Tesfia to choose a fiancé. At the same time, she also felt somewhat happy seeing the strength in her daughter, something that she herself hadn't possessed.

With that, Frose made to leave the room. When she opened the door, she looked over her shoulder at Tesfia to confirm something. "Fia, whereabouts is his rank?"

"... I'm sorry." All she got in response was a stiff reply.

"It's fine. Good night."

Because he was teaching Tesfia, there was no way that Tesfia wouldn't know his rank. If she'd said that she didn't know, the lie would be found out right away. Which was why she'd answered within the realm of what was permissible.

But when Frose turned her face forward again, her lips curled up into a mysterious smile. "Good night, Fia."

"Good night, Mother."

Frose's red hair swayed as she disappeared behind the closing door.

Tesfia was alone in the room at last.

The tension holding her up disappeared, and she collapsed onto her bed. For the moment her biggest worry had been alleviated. Moreover, this was the first time in a long while that she'd spoken with her mother this much. And she'd been able to speak her mind.

Happiness filled her heart to take the place of that missing part.

It felt like that missing part in her heart was gradually being filled.

*But I'm a little tired... I think.*

Standing up felt like a bother, so she stripped off her clothes while on the bed. She wouldn't be able to focus on training for today. *Al said there was no point in meaningless training too, so I'll just do today's training tomorrow...*

Having finally achieved peace of mind, Tesfia's eyes closed shut as she sank into sleep. Now that her worries were gone, she had no way to resist the sleepiness that assaulted her.

It really had been so long since she forgot about the time while talking to her daughter, Frose thought to herself, after slowly closing the door to Tesfia's room.

She still had work to do, but the exhaustion that had been built up was gone like it had only been in her mind. It felt like she'd been able to deal with her daughter as a mother rather than as the head of the Fable family for the first time.

Frose, who normally acted with strict behavior as the head of the family, had a peaceful expression on her face.

But her steps suddenly stopped, as she thought of something.

The name from before weighed on her mind.

*Alus... Al... I feel like I've heard that name before...*

Her expression transformed into one of pondering, and she vexingly searched her memories trying to find the cause for the strange shadows she could see in the depths of the sea.

## **Eighteenth Chapter**

### **Pride and Discord**

Alus quietly moved under the blazing sun.

He glared at the red-haired girl next to him, as he wondered why he had to do something like this.

Of course, since they were still within the barrier, the sun above them was artificial and the temperature was being adjusted as well. However, with it being summer, it wasn't quite comfortable and he couldn't help but sweat due to the heat.

Even Tesfia used her hand to block out the light, as if to question who'd set the temperature this high, looking up in spite at the artificial sun in the blue sky.

Alus had only heard her story a few minutes ago, after Tesfia had called him and asked him to meet her. The transfer gate felt so distant. In reality, it was only a five-minute walk on foot, but the difference in temperature between outdoors and indoors was too great to bear.

There were two kinds of transfer gates within the Institute. One was the type used to move within the Institute grounds, and the other was the long-distance gate used to come and go from the Institute.

Though there were no set policies on where transfer gates could be set up, a location that was a comfortable place with less magic noise was preferred. As transferring included the precise reproduction of mana, the effects of mana remnants needed to be taken into consideration. If someone were to unleash magic close to a transfer gate, there was a chance that the gate could malfunction.

For that reason, it was common to set up a partition around a transfer gate to shut down magic.

Right now, Alus and Tesfia were making their way to the internal transfer gate. That said, Alus was only reluctantly accompanying her after Tesfia had returned from her home following a single night and pleaded with him, with a serious expression. As a result, his own expression was twitching a little.

Here he'd been told that it was something important... but to Alus, she'd done nothing but bring back more trouble.

When he heard what she had to say, he even tried to turn around and go back to the Institute alone.

But Tesfia clasped her hands together and begged him. "Please, my mother wants to talk with you."

He'd had a feeling something like this might happen when he heard her training stick had been found, but considering that this 'talk' might just lead to even more pain, Alus felt a headache coming on.

Tesfia had tried to resist on her own, but with her going up against the renowned head of the Fable family, this result was inevitable.

"What happens if I refuse?"

"... In the worst case, I might have to drop out of the Institute." Contrary to the bright summer sun, Tesfia's expression was dark and gloomy.

*That's a very treacherous and troublesome flow of events, just like you'd expect from nobility.*

Tesfia hadn't mentioned any details, and that most likely wasn't from her own will. But Alus knew that the ties of obligation in a prestigious noble family and powerful persuasive forces were at work. "That's interesting to hear. I see, so you called me out to greet you back because this might be the last time we meet... thanks for all of your efforts," he teased Tesfia.

"I'm sure you think I'm being selfish... but this is all I can rely on! It might not be much to you, but I've definitely grown. That's why I don't want the gates closed on my future as a Magicmaster! Please!"

She stopped where she stood and deeply bowed to Alus, who didn't even bother to stop walking or turn around.

After glancing at her over his shoulder, he sighed and scratched the back of his head. "Talk about strange tastes," he muttered in a quiet voice.

Tesfia's life had been in danger during the incident with Godma, and she should have gotten a taste for what it was really like to be a Magicmaster, yet she still wanted to continue down that path.

So what else could he say? Even despite the fact that most Magicmasters ended up being expendable... "It sounds like a pain, but I don't like the sound of your mother doing whatever she pleases."

"Then..."

"I'll give you a hand. The training stick is partially my fault too, after all."

A bright expression bloomed on Tesfia's face as she ran up to Alus.

"Thanks, Al! ...Also, I thought up something like a script—"

"Stop messing around. What makes you think your script or whatever would work? Leave that kind of thing to someone who actually thinks before they speak. I'm saying that I'll help, so don't do something unnecessary."

"Urgh... but..."

"If you say you want to stop the training, that's one thing. But having you butting in on everything is getting on my nerves, so stop talking crap. I've never liked the nobility since being in the military, but this will be a good opportunity."

As far as Alus knew, the nobility had always been like that. He wouldn't go so far as to say they all were the same, but most of them were all talk, and while they schemed in the shadows they never came close to stepping out into the Outer World.

"Uhm... she is my mother, you know." While Tesfia found that side of Alus reassuring, her anxiety only grew when she saw him looking like he'd found a great chance to vent his frustrations. She resolved to spy on the two no matter what happened.



The next day, after Tesfia and Alice finished their training.

The two girls both felt like they were seeing results, however minor they might be. It was the same training as always, trying to keep the mana within the training stick, but now they were managing to do so for a longer period of time.

Claiming that it was a rapid development due to their youth would be folly, but magic was in fact influenced by the state of one's mind, and you never knew what could set it off.

After the incident, their mana had grown more dense. The information in mana contained all the experience of its master. In other words, there would be a visible response to any new experiences and changes in state of mind.

Those who were inexperienced even ran the risk of their mana running rampant. Meanwhile, mental growth, or an increase in the ability to control their emotions would lead to making their control over their mana become more stable.

Perhaps the two had managed to overcome something on top of their training. All they needed to do now was continue training on a daily basis to build their new growth into their foundation.

Alus called out to them as he came out of the shower room. "Well, I guess you two are doing fine."

"—H-Hey, put something on first!" Tesfia showed no exhaustion from training, as she blushed and turned her back on Alus.

Having just come out of the shower, his chest was bare. He had a towel hanging over his shoulder, and let out a sigh. "What are you, a kid? In fact, what does it matter what I wear in my own room?"

Alice, on the other hand, let out a stupefied sound as she stared straight at him. But having someone stare at him so intently was a bother in and of itself.

Alus never let up on his daily training. Because of that, he was fit, with the right amount of muscles where they were needed. There was no waste or excess to be seen anywhere on his body.

Loki, who would have been used to seeing it, was stealing glances at him next to Alice. And she made sure to file the sight among her most precious memories. "Sir Alus, please wipe your hair before you come out. It's getting the floor wet," she said, as she traced his path and wiped up the droplets of water. The sight was like that of a mother cleaning up after her child.

"Ah, sorry," Alus apologized, and used the towel on his shoulders to carelessly dry his hair. His rough method made it clear that he'd never really cared much for that sort of thing.

Suddenly the towel was snatched out of his hand. "Oh, you're going to damage your hair if you do that."

Unlike Tesfia, Alice didn't hesitate to reach out and steal the towel. Alus was made to hold still while she gently wiped off the moisture in his hair.

"A-Alice... I'm amazed you can touch him." Tesfia managed to turn her red face towards Alus, and pointed with a trembling finger.

"Hey, don't make it sound like I'm filth or something. You're just exaggerating."

Alice's towel handling was brilliant. Having his hair dried felt unexpectedly nice, so Alus closed his eyes and entrusted everything to her. Her exquisite skills made him feel drowsy.

"Fia, I feel bad for Al if you say that. Besides, isn't this only normal? You have your servants do this for you back home, don't you?" Alice had visited the Fable estate, and having seen this for herself, she gazed over at Tesfia.

"A-Alice!" Tesfia rushed to silence Alice, as this wasn't something she wanted publicly known. "... A-Anyways! Yeah, maybe it is normal...?"

A noble's lifestyle aside, this was the first time she'd seen a man's naked upper body. She glanced over at Alus out of the corner of her eye, and as she took an interest in him, she timidly approached him like he was a sleeping wolf.

Then she took advantage of the fact that his eyes were closed to stare at his build, and she pushed her palm against his chest. "It's kinda hard?"

Alus opened one of his eyes and looked at her, making her turn her face down and hurriedly pull her hand away.

"Sir Alus is well trained, so that is only obvious," Loki said loftily, but she used the opening Tesfia made to feel up Alus' upper arm. She acted cool, but she actually wanted to praise Tesfia's courage. Making full use of the general confusion, she touched his body, little by little.

With a blush on her face, Loki continued while making excuses to herself. The normal Loki would've said that she was running out of control.

However, her hand suddenly stopped moving, and the relaxed atmosphere froze with it.

"That old scar..." Loki and Alice had both noticed it, but it was a surprised Tesfia who said it out loud.

Alus ran his finger across the scar as if he'd only just noticed its existence.

Taking a closer look, Tesfia could see other small scars here and there on his body.

"Well, I got most of them when I was young... but there shouldn't be any deep ones that stand out."

"Oh." That was all Tesfia could say. And Alice was speechless.

He didn't need to say anything further for them to understand how cruel the world he'd lived in had been. The words 'when he was young' only served to make them aware of just how bad it had been, and neither of them was able to say anything else.

But there was another girl present who understood the deeper meanings behind the scars. "But if you think of them as being what made Sir Alus who he is now, don't they appear... endearing?" Loki said to Alice with a smile.

She wasn't just making something up on the spot either, those were her true feelings.

"I'm not going to say that scars are a badge of honor, but you should understand that this is the kind of world Magicmasters live in." With his eyes closed again, Alus bluntly spoke the truth of their world.

The past Tesfia who didn't know anything might have blown him off with a remark like, "That's obvious." But now, the truth in those words resonated deep in her heart.

In front of the boy whose body looked like he'd been torn into by the world itself, she couldn't possibly say something like that. So she simply nodded in silence.

"Loki, dear, do you have a comb and hair dryer?" Alice spoke out to ease the atmosphere.

Loki said, "Even if Sir Alus doesn't use it, I have one that you can use," as she stood and headed towards her room.

"Hey, Alice... can I try it too?" Tesfia nervously asked Alice, who handed the towel over to her.

"Go try it on your own head." Alus' objection went unheard, as he could hear Tesfia gulp behind him.

"Come on, just a little bit. I watched Alice do it, so I can do it too."

Alus had a bad feeling after hearing this. And as if to immediately back up his feeling—"Ow! Hey, calm down will you! Ah?!"

Tesfia seemed to have misunderstood something, as she violently whirled the towel around, rustling not just his hair, but shaking his head too.

And on top of all that... "You just scratched me with your nails, didn't you?" Alus held his head and turned around to glare at her.

"Ahaha, sorry," Tesfia replied, with an awkward laugh.

She must have had some kind of grudge. And just like that, the hair that Alice had put in order was now a mess.

When Loki returned with the comb and hair dryer she was shocked to see Alus' hair, and looked like she was stifling her laughter.

In the end, she used them both to fix his hair, but it took a while longer.

After that, Tesfia and Alice got to training again, but partway through they changed from the usual mana control training.

Right now, the two of them were diligently practicing at the training grounds. It all began with Tesfia saying that she wanted to see Alice's new spell up close. Alus allowed it on the basis that a mock battle every now and then would be good for them.

Moreover, the two had been doing mock battles on their own since before they entered the Institute, and were keeping score. With their skills improving, they felt like it was about time to test themselves.

It was the perfect opportunity to vent their frustrations with the plain and boring mana control training. Incidentally, Alus wasn't present, as he'd

be unable to keep himself from speaking out. And if he was going to do that, it wouldn't be any different from their usual training.

That was also because Alus had other things to do. Not thinking up ways to deal with Tesfia's mother, but analyzing the unusual ingot he'd bought from Budna. Since it was an unknown material, Alus was getting really worked up for the first time in a while. And since he was in the laboratory, of course, Loki was with him.

Alus interjected with the occasional "I see" and "how interesting" as he looked over the detailed results of the ingot's analysis.

It had been a while since Loki had seen him like this, and she quietly watched over him with a smile so as not to get in his way.

Of course, she didn't forget to bring refreshments at the right time. With that, she was able to enjoy the sight of Alus devoting himself to his research. He had spent most of his life so far contributing to humanity through extraordinary efforts, so he should be allowed to focus on whatever grabbed his interest now.

However, that peaceful time came to a sudden halt.

It happened shortly after Loki started her detection training. The sound of the doorbell rang out, and their attention turned towards the front door.

The bell that rang out only once had a strange inexplicable feeling to it. After being pressed for longer than you would normally hear it pressed, it stopped completely. The two of them couldn't recall anyone who rang a doorbell like that.

It clearly wasn't Tesfia or Alice, nor was it Felinella. And the most unusual thing was that neither Alus nor Loki had sensed a presence until the visitor rang the bell.

Well, noticing such things ahead of time was strange, but both Alus and Loki had sharp senses.

Alus hadn't let his guard down, but he might have been too invested in his research. He signaled Loki with his eyes.

Just in case, she checked the camera outside the door, and saw an old man with a gentle expression.

Next, the well-dressed old man politely bowed to the camera.

Loki concluded that no intruder would be this bold, and opened the door.

The old man looked a little grateful as Loki led him in, and once he stood in front of Alus, he held his hand against his chest and bowed once more. "Forgive me for the sudden visit. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Selva Greenus, the Fable family butler."

The elderly butler who introduced himself as Selva had perfect manners, which helped ease Alus' and Loki's guard. The bow from this man with a straight posture was completely fluid, not showing his age in the slightest.

Alus had heard a little from Tesfia and had expected this visitor at some point, but this was just too fast. And he'd showed up with perfect timing, when Tesfia wasn't present. "I'm Alus, Ms. Tesfia's classmate. Nice to meet you."

Selva's eyebrows furrowed for a moment at Alus' flat reply. It was suspicion over the fact that he hadn't introduced himself as Tesfia's close friend or instructor, but simply as her classmate. Though no one else would notice such a slight change.

Incidentally, Alus had made his position vague to get a feel for how much Selva knew.

And Selva, maintaining his position as an ordinary butler, guessed as much and didn't speak of it any further.

However, he did give him personal words of thanks. "Thank you for always taking care of young Lady Tesfia."

This visit was because Tesfia had won in her battle against the stubborn traditions of nobility, which Selva welcomed. He had a discerning eye that was no different from Frose's, and it told him that it was Alus who was responsible for Tesfia's growth. His intuition developed over the years told him as much from the first glance.

Considering they were at an institute, Alus' existence here was frankly abnormal. He was different from the inexperienced youngsters, a clear outsider.

"I see, so I can't get away with feigning ignorance, can I?" Alus could tell that this Selva was no normal butler.

But more importantly... "Hearing her called Lady Tesfia does make her sound like she's nobility."

"Al, Ms. Tesfia did say that she was from a noble family from the start," Loki added, not using any formal address and calling Alus by his nickname so as to seem like they were just normal friends. Selva's intentions still weren't clear.

"That's true." Alus knew as much after their first meeting. "But to be honest, she just doesn't fit the image of a 'young lady.'"

"Perhaps not," Loki said.

The two exchanged troubled looks. They weren't trying to make fun of her.

Seeing this, Selva's expression eased up, though he had a wry smile on his face. "I see. I am relieved to hear it. Lady Tesfia spent most of her youth at the mansion with strict manners being enforced upon her... but it appears that she is spending life properly as a student here. No one person is suited for everything, and in that sense, she endured quite a bit."

"Well, let's leave it at that." Alus felt something similar to himself in Selva, and while he was still cautious of him, he did feel like he didn't need to choose his words around him.

Loki offered to head to the kitchen to prepare tea, but Selva politely declined. That also meant that he would be getting to the point.

Of course, that's just what Alus wanted as well, though he had a rough idea of what it would entail as he'd heard the details before from Tesfia. "You're here because of Ms. Fia... we don't need that anymore, you're here because of Fia, right?"

"Yes. I just visited Principal Sisty, and she also left me with a message for you to come to the principal's office after this."

*So it would be pointless to refuse, huh.* That clearly meant that the principal would get involved. "But it's strange to talk about someone without them being present."

"There are some circumstances involved, you see," Selva replied calmly.

Either way, getting the principal involved was definitely a method Alus wasn't fond of. Of course, since Selva had paid a visit to the laboratory with this timing, Alus knew that he'd been intending for Tesfia's absence.

Then again, things would just get tangled up even if she was here, so it didn't matter to Alus. "I understand. Sorry Loki, but could you watch over those two when they get back?"

Alus asked her to look over their training, but there was a pause before her answer for once. "... But." The gloom on Loki's expression was probably because he'd be dealing with someone who was a big-shot noble. Tesfia's mother, the head of the Fable family, was renowned, and since the Fable family butler had come out of his way to visit, she must be rather impressive.

However, when Alus was in the military, it was almost always the nobles who forced reckless missions on him. That's why Loki would have wanted to accompany him as support if possible.

But Alus ordered her to stand by. She wanted to resist, but still wanted to remain faithful to his intentions. Ultimately, she was unable to make any selfish demands.

That's when a hand landed on Loki's head, as if she'd been seen through. "Well, nothing that's going to make you worry will happen. So I'm counting on you."

She pouted with dissatisfaction, and placed her own hands atop the hand on her head.

Her looking to him with upturned eyes showing worry prompted him to add, "I'll be right back."

That meant that he'd return before Loki became uneasy. After he'd said that much, Loki's selfish desires were dampened.

"Ms. Loki, was it. I would like to ask you to take care of young Lady Tesfia as well."

And she definitely couldn't disregard it when the elderly butler, three times her age, asked her as well. In the end, Loki had no choice but to accept it.

"I understand. But... please return home quickly."

Loki saw the two off with a worried expression, completely unaware that her way of speaking had returned to normal.

The elderly butler who was leading Alus moved in a way you'd never expect from someone his age.

He didn't make a sound as he stepped down the stairs. His hands were held behind his back and remained motionless, his center of balance perfectly fixed in place.

As expected, this butler had a different set of skills aside from what was required of his official position.

His approach not being detected was certainly not just because he wasn't letting his mana flow freely.

Either way, Alus couldn't determine if he was a Magicmaster or not, but he was convinced that this was no ordinary old man.

If this was a capable Magicmaster, he could understand most things. He could very naturally pick up on how much experience and skill they had. Even if they held their mana back, the slight mana leakage or pressure they were exerting was enough to tell.

But first-rate Magicmasters were capable of perfect mana control, preventing any leaking whatsoever. Moreover, those kinds of people didn't exert any intimidating pressure on their surroundings, either.

While he wasn't showing it—this old man might be one such master.

Regardless, Alus' intuition told him that the butler in front of him was not someone so easily trifled with. "Are all butlers for important noble families like you?"

"In what way, might I ask?" Selva replied mildly to the sudden question.

He might not be playing stupid, and Alus realized that perhaps his question was too rough, and he rephrased it. "Is the butler's job something that requires such considerable fighting skill?" He could feel Selva turning his senses toward him.

"It might be indeed. At times you are required for guard and escort duties. However, the Fable family simply has fewer guards than other noble houses... to answer your question, butlers always stay by the head of the family's side, so I personally believe they need a fair understanding of it."

*Understanding, is it?* Alus thought to himself, as he felt like the butler had dodged his question. Though it was enough of an answer for a simple inquiry.

"Additionally, this might be very rude of me... but I have the mysterious sense that you are out of place yourself."

"I'll bet."

Selva didn't particularly seem to mind the bland reply, in fact, he smiled somewhat happily and continued, "Moreover, if I were to frankly ask, you are the student who instructed Lady Tesfia, are you not, Mr. Alus?"

"..."

"I was wondering why she was being taught by another student. I believed only Ms. Alice would have been on par with her amongst the new students."

"Perhaps within the Institute." At this point there was no hiding it, Alus thought, and resolved himself.

"That's why I knew that it was you who has been guiding Lady Tesfia at first glance. And perhaps that might have been the best for her."

"We've only just met, and haven't spoken for more than a minute." Alus furrowed his brow at his exaggerated words.

Yet Selva chuckled a little, and continued without turning around, "At this age, you can tell just from exchanging a few words. There are, of course, some things that you can't, but I haven't lived a long life for nothing. And I have seen a lot of people... if I were to say it, Mr. Alus doesn't appear to hold a good impression of nobles."

Alus lightly nodded behind him, and even though Selva hadn't looked behind him, he seemed to understand that.

"And I can't say that your impression is necessarily wrong. At the very least, this nation was filled with the kind of people who were nobility in name alone. The kind that tricked, deceived and treated the lives of others as if they were pieces in a game. They'd use a person for what they were worth, and then discard them like a broken toy. I have seen many foul people like that."

"What about me?"

"Oh, who knows. But at the very least, I believe you are someone worthy of Lady Tesfia's trust."

*This old man keeps dodging my questions, Alus thought.*

Yet he wasn't disturbed. Even if it was because of a mission, Alus had killed people, so in terms of good or bad, he was definitely bad. There was no doubting that, since he himself thought so.

Selva kept his answers ambiguous. Though vague, he'd felt that Alus wasn't the kind of person who would betray someone who trusted him.

He was also convinced that he wasn't someone who used or looked down on his allies... he'd gleaned as much from Alus' and Loki's interactions.

As for Alus... *It seems this butler is secretly on Fia's side, but he obeys the will of the head of the family because of his position. He also seems very loyal.* Which meant that he wouldn't be able to extract any information that might harm the head of the family even if they continued to talk.

Alus decided to stop their conversation here, but upon exiting the research building, his eyes came across something unfamiliar.

Upon seeing that reaction, Selva asked, "Are you interested in magic cars?"

"I'm not too interested in the car itself. It's just that you don't see a lot of these around here."

In this day and age when transfer gates existed, it was a tad too much. If he thought of it as a status symbol among nobles, then he just couldn't wrap his head around them.

Alus had no connection with magic cars, so his only interest in them lay in their internal structure and the fundamental principles used for motion. The luxurious model or sleek form didn't interest him one bit.

"I saw a lot of research equipment in your room, Mr. Alus."



"It's just a hobby of mine."

Selva didn't point out the fact that Alus didn't live in the dorm despite his student status, and instead continued to pursue the topic of research. "If it's not a bother, might I ask what kind of research are you doing?"

Alus hesitated for a moment. If it would be a bother or not depended on what kind of business they had after this. Yet, as long as it stayed on the topic of Alus' personal hobby, it shouldn't affect it too much.

"Yes, well, recently I found an interesting mineral, and I was looking into it to see if it could be used for AWRs or something like it... I'd also like to make a magic formula from scratch that's suitable for it."

Normally it was unthinkable for a student who'd only just enrolled at the Institute a few months ago to be talking about making a new AWR. Building up a magic formula from scratch was even more preposterous. That was something only a handful of specialized researchers could do over the course of several years, for example, when they would come together as a research team to develop something for a national project.

Alus also had the appearance of a student looking to become a Magicmaster, so normally things wouldn't add up.

Moreover, those who looked to become Magicmasters wouldn't be trying their hand at magic research. Magicmasters and researchers were opposite professions, in a sense. The field of magic research was especially advanced, so there were several walls separating Magicmasters and magic researchers, apart from mere suitability.

However, after a brief pause... "That is extraordinary research. But the creation of a new magic formula would be a great achievement."

The nuance in Selva's tone made it hard to tell if he was making fun of him, or if he was truly impressed. In terms of not letting others read him, Selva was a step or two above Alus.

"It's not as impressive as you make it sound. I have hopes to be able to do something during the summer vacation. Devising a concrete formula should be doable if I can connect some magical circuits together."

"...!!" Selva simply had a bitter smile on his face.

Besides, they were almost at their destination. He was interested in what else Alus might say, but there wasn't enough time to ask. The walk from the research building to the main building didn't take too long after all.

Before long, the two stood in front of the principal's office. Selva knocked on the door, reporting, "I've brought Mr. Alus," to which a calm voice replied, "Come in" from the other side.

As Selva politely pulled the door open to invite Alus inside, a refreshing scent tickled his nostrils.

A normal student might freeze up when dealing with the highest authority in the Institute. Of course, Alus didn't so much as feel a tinge of nervousness when he stepped in. All he was thinking about was getting this over with as soon as possible.

When he entered, there was already another visitor in the room.

It was a woman sitting on one side of the sofa, and she had red hair that looked a lot like a certain someone's hair.

And on the opposite side, by the desk, was a smiling Sisty. Her bewitching smile seemed to imply even more than usual today. "Welcome, Alus. I'm sorry for calling you out when you're busy."

Even the tone of her voice was different from the usual. She invited him in with clearly forced behavior to keep up appearances.

When Alus took his first step inside, the woman with lustrous red hair slowly stood up. Her high-quality dress was a sign of her social status and dignity. But it was more modest than he expected, as in his experience, nobility usually wore flashy outfits to garner attention.

The woman was about as tall as he was, and she had the air and looks of someone commanding. The fierce crimson eyes of someone who'd overcome countless battles pierced Alus, and looked him over as if to appraise him.

However, that was only for an instant. Within the blink of an eye, her expression had already transformed into something more gentle, and with a smile she softly spoke, "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Frose Fable. And you would be Mr. Alus, correct?"





With a charming smile on her face, Frose reached out her hand, dressed in a thin evening glove.

Her manners as a noble were perfect. It didn't feel like she was putting up a front, but still, she had an aura that kept people from needlessly approaching her. Even if they had just met someplace else, Alus wouldn't have considered her to be a commoner for a moment. That was how much grace and confidence he'd seen in her in this brief spell of time.

"The pleasure is all mine. Though it appears I don't have to introduce myself." With a slight bow, Alus greeted her in kind to keep her in check. However, he wasn't as calm as he appeared. If anything, he was flustered inside.

The reason wasn't because this was Tesfia's mother, but because he'd missed that her name was Frose.

That name was already famous when he first began serving. The brave red-haired Frose was one of the Three Pillars alongside Vizaist and Sisty when she was on active duty. As a peerless general, she'd earned her name commanding in battles against Fiends, giving her the nickname "Red-Haired Frose."

Alus glanced at Sisty, who was responsible for this meeting, wanting to give her a piece of his mind.

But to his surprise, Sisty herself had a bewildered and faltering smile as she seemed to be waiting for Frose's next move. And he realized that they hadn't arranged this beforehand.

Thinking about it, Sisty was supposed to be protecting Alus' identity. She must not like Frose meeting him either.

*In that case, Alus thought, Sisty was probably pushed into this meeting due to her position.*

Selva said he had a message from the principal, but that most likely was because Frose was pushing for it. That meant that Sisty probably had nothing to do with this, and was here more as an observer keeping an eye out so Alus' secret didn't come out.

Having surmised as much, Alus determined that it would be in his best interests to get out of this as soon as possible.

For now though, he sat down on the sofa facing Frose, and spoke first to beat Frose to the punch. "Sorry about this, but my schedule is full, so can you keep this short?" Alus wasn't going to get timid with anyone, but, to be frank, he didn't think he'd be able to beat her in a fight with words. Especially so, since he was facing someone that even made Sisty hold her tongue.

"My, is that so. I believe that there's a bare minimum explanation that has to be made before we can get to the main topic. And I apologize, but explaining things in order will take some time. Besides, I don't have much time myself."

Perhaps his youthful frankness had just gotten her worked up instead. After closing her eyes for a moment, Frose smiled with an unassuming expression and fought back against Alus' check.

Neither side looked like they wanted to yield, but that wasn't actually the case. Bargaining for yielding ground could only be established when both sides had room for negotiation.

However, Alus had no intention of compromising. "Is that so? Then I suppose we should take this on some other day. That way I can take some time off beforehand."

He'd heard a quick summary from Tesfia, but there was no point in listening to it again. Taking advantage of Frose's sudden arrival without making an appointment, Alus stood and unhesitatingly made his way to the door.

Sisty remained firmly a spectator, crossing her arms as she watched Alus leave, but making no move to stop him.

To Alus, this kind of scramble for the initiative was pointless.

As Selva called out "Master Frose," Frose too realized that the nobility's way of bargaining wouldn't work with Alus. "I'm sorry, Mr. Alus. But please wait a moment."

As she said that, she dropped her poker face and put on what was most likely her normal, soft expression. She no longer appeared to be appraising Alus, either. "It seems it's just like Fia said."

Alus decided this was her usual expression, because the way she looked with a wry smile on her face was the spitting image of Tesfia. If he were to point out a difference, it would be the composure that came with age and the more friendly impression that her upturned lips gave.

In reality, Alus had expected this development. A noble had taken the time to come all the way to the Institute, so there was no way they'd go home with nothing to show for it. "I'm not going to ask exactly what you heard from her, but it doesn't sound like I'm being complimented."

As he sat back down on the sofa, Selva appeared with black tea from somewhere.

Sisty maintained her meaningful smile, and thought that he should have done so from the start.

This was where things began for real.

*According to Tesfia, she hadn't told her mother anything about his rank, or anything confidential, but... Loki's records aren't exactly confidential. And reaching me from there would be simple. Even if she doesn't have any conclusive evidence, I should assume that she has a general grasp of things.*

Alus would need to carefully choose his words, while anticipating Frose's hand.

Sisty was present to observe how things went down, and to keep a lid on information in the case that it leaked. Even if Alus' secret reached some parts of the public, she'd stop it from spreading within the Institute.

Alus turned his gaze back to Frose.

Under his stare, she calmly brought the cup of tea to her lips, and took a sip. She drew a long breath as a preamble, and then began to speak. "Mr. Alus, I heard from Sisty that you are teaching Fia and Alice. I'd like to start by thanking you."

"It wasn't a problem. It's true that I accepted that role. But I can't deny that I was more or less forced to. Either way, I haven't done anything significant yet."

"Oh, I don't think that's true. At the very least, that kind of change shouldn't be possible unless they've at least seen a glimpse of true battle 'outside.'"

As Frose denied his words, Alus narrowed his eyes.

As expected of a former high-ranking soldier, Frose wouldn't be so easy to handle.

It was clear that she was talking about the change in form and nature of Tesfia's Icicle Sword. After the extracurricular lesson and the fight against Godma's Dolls, she had picked up a lot of things, which was why the Fable family's traditional magical sculpting that she was so good at had changed.

*I'd taken it as just a sign of her growth, but perhaps it went beyond that.*

"Are you aware that there was an extracurricular lesson held recently?"

"Yes, I hear it was the first time the Second Magical Institute tried their hand at it."

"I believe she saw her glimpse of true battle outside when she experienced the threat of Fiends."

"I see. It's true that battle against Fiends is the first step in knowing the Outer World. And you are able to sift out the Magicmasters who are unable to overcome that."

With a seemingly satisfied smile, Frose continued, "Then, about that stick that repulses mana... how would you explain that?"

Alus had expected as much, but he honestly didn't have any good excuses. It was unclear how much information the other party had, but it would be next to impossible to dodge the question. "That was something I had made. I just happened to get my hands on some good material. Well, it was kind of like an extension of my hobby."

The problem was that the material was so special. If pressed, he'd have to reveal a portion of his abilities and status anyway. The rest would depend on whether or not Frose saw through him.

The edges of Frose's lips curled upward to the point that even Alus could tell. "That material happens to be from a Fiend, doesn't it? And a rather high-classed one at that. From what I know, not even a Fiend's remains can easily be brought into the human domain. It requires considerable technology to preserve, and the nation's and military's official permission to even be allowed to safeguard such a thing... Mr. Alus, you wouldn't happen to be nobility or from a family of similar status, would you?"

"Surely you jest."

Frose already knew this. She'd thoroughly researched noble families when looking for a suitable fiancé for Tesfia. Moreover, an upstart noble wouldn't be able to get their hands on high-classed Fiend parts just to then turn them into training equipment. Though she was retired, Frose always kept up on information pertaining to the military and nobles.

"Just what are you trying to say? I was sure this was about your daughter." Alus was getting sick of the roundabout pursuit, and hurried her along.

"Oh, but this is very important... even to her."

He looked at Frose's face again. Not only was she keeping up noble appearances, but it seemed she was also seriously thinking of her daughter as well.

Sisty, still subdued, felt the storm brewing and lightly shook her head, while holding her temples.

Of course, the only one who saw her was Selva, who stood off to the side.

"Fia is, of course, the main reason why I came here today. But as a parent, I'd like to know what kind of person is teaching her every day."

Not having had parents, Alus couldn't deny Frose's claim of parental love. But he did wonder if parents really did worry about every detail like this. "I'm just your average civilian student, and certainly nothing close to something as great as nobility," he said, and waited to see how Frose would react.

Considering everything so far, he was now convinced that she was still gathering information, and that she didn't know everything yet. After all, her smile was still very ambiguous. Though he didn't know her intentions, that at least was good news.

Also, for the head of an important noble family, she was surprisingly tolerant. At least she didn't seem to have taken any offense at his sarcasm.

It was something that would have prompted Vizaist to furrow his brows with a sullen expression, as he claimed that nobility wasn't all that.

"... I can't imagine your average student being able to get their hands on that stick, but fine." Like Frose said, this was a rare material that you'd struggle to obtain even if you could pay an exorbitant amount of money.

For starters, the miasma-like mana that Fiends emanated wasn't good for humans. And unless it was preserved using special equipment, the Fiend parts would start to crumble the moment the Fiend's core was destroyed, which was probably for the best.

There was technology for purifying the miasma, but the cost was quite high. Moreover, there were also all kinds of substitute materials for low-classed Fiend parts.

In short, making use of such equipment and technology to preserve low-classed Fiend parts was unthinkable. In other words, those kinds of measures were only taken for parts from high-classed or Variant Fiends, which was why there weren't many in circulation.



It was also a big risk to even bring in Fiend parts to the human domain, considering how many mysteries were wrapped around them. They could end up regenerating and multiplying, and then there were the issues with mental hygiene.

At most, it would only be permitted once or twice a year, for the sake of investigations and research.

Anyway, Alus could predict what Frose wanted to touch on. If she wasn't going to pursue the matter of the training stick any further, that would be a blessing to him, but it also meant that her real business pertained to her daughter. Her side as a former soldier was evident, but ultimately, she was Tesfia's mother.

Frose maintained her smile and changed the topic. "I'm sorry about this, Mr. Alus... but I'd like you to refrain from instructing Fia any further. If you can do that, I won't pry into your affairs anymore."

She said this resolutely, but there was some gratitude mixed in with her words, in part because as her mother she genuinely rejoiced over Tesfia's growth.

Just listening to the words, it sounded exactly like the kind of oppressive and selfish speech Alus had come to expect from the nobility he loathed—if he were to take the words at face value, that is.

However, he could catch a glimpse of her inner feelings that she would never show in front of Tesfia. While it was still selfish, it seemed Frose had her own logic under which she operated.

"May I ask the reason? As someone who's taken so much time out of his schedule to tutor your daughter, I can't back down just because you said to."

"That's fine, but do keep this a secret from Fia." Frose swore him to secrecy, thinking of her daughter. Seeing Alus silently nod, she glanced over at Sisty, seemingly requesting the same of her. Sisty also wordlessly agreed.

After confirming this, Frose began to speak. "Mr. Alus... how is Fia from your point of view?"

"'How,' as in...?"

"Unfortunately, I wasn't very blessed in magic talent. When I was active, I was stuck as a Triple... Without any favoritism, I think Fia is more blessed with talent than me." Normally, a Triple Digit status was more than enough of an achievement for a Magicmaster. But for someone from a major noble family, it wasn't enough.

Deciding that he would listen to everything she had to say, Alus nodded, while maintaining his silence.

"When I was on active duty, the difference between my abilities and a certain Double Digit Magicmaster who eventually climbed up to be a Single Digit was as clear as day."

"Would that Magicmaster be the principal?"

"... Yes."

Alus had more or less caught on. Frose had called the principal by her name. These two were once part of the Three Pillars, were close in rank, and both were women. Their relationship must have run quite deep.

With a wry smile on her lips, Frose continued to reminisce. "Sisty and I would often team up. But because of our differences in talent and rank, I turned to taking command. You might not know about it, but I was called up to help with the Fiend invasion five years ago, too."

Alus did actually know that. It was a battle that would remain in his memories forever.

"There have been several outbreaks of massive numbers of the creatures being stirred up by high-classed Fiends, and threatening the human domain. But as far as I know, that was the largest force ever," Frose said, "with ten A-class Fiends, and a total of over a thousand altogether. It was assumed that Alpha in particular would be devastated. But due to Sisty's great efforts, not a single Fiend breached the defensive line. There were Magicmaster casualties, but even they were less than half of what was expected."

It was during that incident that it was discovered that A-class Fiends could group up—ten of them working together. One of them was a new species that would later be named Siren.

And those A-class Fiends had tried to close in on the human domain.

Most of the casualties Frose mentioned weren't Magicmasters on the defensive line, but those who'd been sent to eliminate the A-class threats.

While the line hadn't been breached, thanks to Sisty, a lot of Magicmasters had worked in the shadows.

The Magicmaster who'd dealt with the majority of the high-classed Fiends remained wrapped in mystery to this day.

This achievement was said to be the pinnacle of everything the special forces led by Vizaist had accomplished, though they took losses so heavy that the forces had to be disbanded afterwards. That was just how disastrous a battle it had been.

Some were lucky enough to have scraps of flesh or bits of bone left of them. Some didn't even have that, and were identified through what remained of their belongings, if that. Everything gruesome in the world was condensed into that chaotic battleground.

Frose closed her eyes as she continued, "When I saw Sisty then, I was convinced that we were leagues apart. With my haphazard talent, I would never reach her level no matter how much effort I put in... she goes beyond natural talent. A single Magicmaster that could display power exceeding that of hundreds, if not thousands... I feel bad for Fia, but she's nowhere close to that."

Sisty cleared her throat, as Frose continued to focus on her as the topic. As the principal, she had trouble accepting a statement that would cut off Tesfia's future, but these were the words of her parent, and what she was saying was mostly the truth.

While Tesfia could aim to become a normal Magicmaster, things would be different if she was to aim for the heights that were the Single Digits. To claim that anyone could become that with enough effort was irresponsible.

*What will he say?* Sisty glanced at Alus out of the corner of her eye.

Alus' expression remained completely unchanged after hearing Frose's explanation. And the next words out of his mouth were... "Is that so."

It was neither an acknowledgment of her, nor a refuting of her. Frose had made a point that Alus could accept.

However... "True, if she'd train to become a Magicmaster the regular way, she'd probably only get as high as a Triple, something that's still within reach for normal people. Far from Single and even Double Digits. But..."

Full of confidence, Alus continued like he was prophesying the future. "If she gets through my training, she'll acquire powers equal to a Double. It would be especially worth it if she could become a Single Digit. You brought up the principal as an example, but she spent some time as a Double first. Sure, I can't say she'd become a Single Digit, but a Double Digit wouldn't be unrealistic. Fortunately Fia has enough power to keep up with my training."

Alus paused, and muttered under his breath, "It'd be a problem for me if she couldn't... well, in the end, it's up to her."

"..." Frose fell silent at Alus' words, and contemplated them carefully.

Was this really the case? She'd come here to reject that very possibility in the first place.

Frose looked over the boy in front of her again. Normally, she'd dismiss it as a child's drivel, but this boy had instructed Tesfia and achieved a degree of results.

She'd also picked up on the cues from Sisty, and was convinced that this boy was different, even if she didn't know exactly how. Especially when thinking of what was best for her daughter, it was only natural that Frose would quietly ponder over things, even if it wasn't what Tesfia wanted. She wouldn't be able to reach a conclusion right away.

Frankly put, she wasn't sure how to appraise this student. However, she opened herself to the possibility of another option after meeting him.

Unfortunately, a knock on the door interrupted Frose's thinking. It was a somewhat panicked and strangely forceful knock.

Sisty had instructed Selva to hang a "do not disturb" sign outside, but the visitor who rushed in wasn't some unrelated third party.

Standing in the open doorway was Tesfia Fable herself.

Having run all the way here, she didn't even stop to catch her breath before rushing up to Frose. "Mother, what is the meaning of this?!"

"Fia. I believe I told you that I wanted to speak with Mr. Alus."

"—!! You did... but this is just too hasty!" Tesfia gritted her teeth at her own carelessness.

It was true that Tesfia hadn't told Alus that the talk would be limited to a phone call. It was only natural to think that Frose would invite him over to the mansion like she did with Alice. So having the head of the family leave the house and come to the Institute just to meet with a student...

Tesfia glanced at Alus, trying to think of a way to smooth things over, but after a few moments she gave up, and sighed.

At the very least it was clear that Frose wasn't expecting Tesfia to be here. She must have wanted to meet Alus alone to judge his character. As proof of that, she'd called him out when Tesfia wasn't around. Perhaps she thought they couldn't be frank with Tesfia present.

Tesfia was left without a way to vent her anger.

Frose regarded Tesfia with a cold look, and returned to her point to cut Tesfia off. Her manner of speaking made her feel like someone completely different. "More importantly, about the military mission the other day... Fia, why did you go on that dangerous mission?"

Tesfia was shaken. She thought she'd been able to hide it, but her mother had seen through her.

Next, Frose turned a sharp look of reproach on Alus. "I wasn't planning on saying this much, but aren't you the one who got her involved, Mr. Alus?"

Sisty, flustered, tried to intervene, but Frose put a stop to that. "Fia must take over as the head of the family. You might not know this, but the Fable family has a deep history."

"You're wrong!!" Tesfia shouted, but it wasn't enough to put a stop to Frose's advance. To Frose, the course of action didn't matter.

And it was indeed Alus' decision to let Tesfia take part in the mission. If Alus wasn't around, Tesfia and Alice wouldn't have gotten involved in it, especially since they were still students. Their mental resolve was still immature, as they were novice Magicmasters.

Frose knew more than Alus had expected. If she knew this much, it might not be possible to smooth things over.

"That was a misstep on my part." Alus lowered his head, but before he could continue with a "But"—

"Don't apologize, Al!" Tesfia clenched her fist and raised her voice. She tried to hold back her overwhelming feelings. "Mother, I'm the one who brought it up! It's all because I begged him to! Al's not responsible at all! Besides... I don't regret it! I don't care if it was a military mission, and you sound like you know what happened... but why do I have to be blamed for rescuing a friend!" With each ragged breath, Tesfia spat out her emotions.

She held her tears back from spilling out, and tried to think. She had to get her mother to understand that she did the right thing.

But in the end—

"I figured it was something like that. But there was no need for you yourself to go. What could you have even done, aside from getting yourself hurt?" Frose finally abandoned the veil of ambiguity and disclosed the

undeniable truths that she knew to condemn Tesfia. "This is unacceptable. You have no concern for your own safety. This won't do at all for the next head of the family. Let's stop this, Fia. From tomorrow, you don't have to be here at the Institute anymore."

"—!! Wait! Mother, this isn't what we..."

"Yes, I said I would think about it after talking with Mr. Alus. If you want to be a Magicmaster, that's fine. But that will be after you get engaged to somebody and become head of the family. I won't restrict you any further, once that is done," Frose mercilessly said to Tesfia, with a cruel smile.

"Why... why can't you understand?"

"Then let me ask again. What did you accomplish by putting yourself in such danger?"

Tesfia wanted to retort right away. Her mouth opened slightly, but no sound came out. She wanted to claim that she saved Alice.

However, the cruel truth stopped her. Wasn't it Alus' power that had saved Alice? After that, she and Alice squared off against Melissa, but wasn't that just because Loki and Alus didn't do so themselves? Just what exactly had she accomplished in that mission?

Since she didn't know how much her mother knew, she couldn't accidentally let anything slip. But she had to say *something*.

*I have to answer, or I'll be forced to drop out...*

Her feeling of impatience and racing heartbeat made her more bewildered and drove her to a foolish conclusion.

The words she spoke... were the worst she could say. "I can kill too. I-I killed a person... and I have the resolve, so I can become a Magicmaster too..." Tesfia said desperately, pleading with Frose.

She wanted to keep believing in her dream. And she no longer had the calmness to distinguish between right and wrong.

The room fell so silent you could hear a pin drop.

Alus pressed his fingers against his temple.

"What are you saying?" Frose said to her.

"Ah, wait, no...!"

When Frose asked her that, the realization of what she'd blurted out finally began to sink in.

"..." Tesfia bit her lower lip and hung her head low. The only noise escaping her throat was a sobbing sound.

As Tesfia fell into the depths of despair, Frose followed up. "... It's true, isn't it? Fia."

"... I-It was against Dolls, they were puppets that had lost their personalities, a-and it was to protect my friend."

"I understand. Magicmasters belong in the military. In the future, that kind of resolve would be necessary. But you are still just a student, and I am here as the head of the Fable family."

Tesfia could only hang her head further at her mother's strict tone of voice.

"I understand that it was an emergency, and that the enemy meant harm. But of all the things... I didn't want to hear you saying that you've gotten the resolve to kill like some lowlife. I have nothing more to say to you. Get out." Frose turned her gaze away, showing no further concern for Tesfia.

That said, she wasn't looking at Alus or anyone else either. Hers weren't the eyes of a mother, but the cold eyes of a noble family's head, looking practically at the future.

Perhaps to hide the stinging pain in her chest, Frose maintained a calm expression with her mouth firmly closed. There might be times when even Magicmasters who fought Fiends would have to point their blades against other humans in the Outer World, such as for violating orders, or desertion... there were even cases of killing someone before they were devoured by Fiends.

But that wasn't something to be proud of. Only someone blind to their shortcomings would put their incompetence on display.

Tesfia remained motionless for a few moments, overwhelmed by what had happened, before she dashed out of the principal's office with trembling lips and huge tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry for the interruption, Mr. Alus." It wasn't until Tesfia was out of sight that Frose finally turned to Alus with an exhausted smile.

"I see. 'As the head of the family,' is it. The way she put it certainly wasn't very smart. But it appears that you nobility who preach about pride would put aside even a noble motive like saving a friend, even though it was clumsily put into words, in order to protect the family name. In that case, I have a few words of my own. I'm not teaching her for your sake, but for my own," Alus replied in kind, with a dry smile.

Frose showed no reaction whatsoever, and simply held her mouth closed as if to urge him to continue.

Alus took a deep breath, and his attitude suddenly changed. He'd taken care to speak with the Fable family head using his best manners, but now he'd lost his patience for that. "Why don't we stop here? I guess I really can't get along with nobility."

"This discussion isn't over."

"Don't worry about it. It's just that as of right now, you happen to belong to the group of nobles that I hate."

"That's a shame. But we've only spoken for a few minutes. What could you understand in that amount of time?"

"I don't understand anything. Ms. Frose, you might be the head of the family, but that doesn't matter to me." Alus narrowed his eyes, and all traces of emotion disappeared from his expression. "I don't like your methods. They make my skin crawl."

Selva twitched, but Frose stopped him with a stare. As expected from a former soldier, intimidation at this level didn't even make her flinch. At the very least, there was no doubt that she was used to this kind of situation.

Frose had experienced her share of bloodshed, making her similar to Sisty in that regard.

"So what will you do?" she asked, with almost abnormal calmness.

No matter how much Alus tried to calm himself down, the irritation he felt remained unchanged. "I'm going to fill up that gap between her and a first-rate Magicmaster that you're feeling. Not that I care about the nobility's obsession with rank."

He'd tried to provoke her, but Frose plainly faced him down. "What truth is there in the words of someone that nobody knows?"

"Then why don't you take a look at your daughter's potential to become a Double at the upcoming Friendship Magical Tournament?"

After saying this, Alus rudely stood up as if he had nothing more to say.

Frose called out to his back as he was about to leave. "By the way... Mr. Alus, what is your rank?"

Alus stopped as he reached for the door knob. "I'll leave that to your imagination."

"How cold. Well, no matter." Frose had asked, fully expecting that she wouldn't receive an answer. Not even her information network had been able to find out what rank he had.

So despite being casually brushed off, Frose's natural, gentle smile was unaffected. "And one more thing..."

She cast her eyes down as she spoke to Alus' back, all the while showing a motherly expression for the first time. "I think she'll be a handful, but please take care of my daughter."

Alus couldn't tell what her real intentions were, because her words were so sudden. When he glanced her way, Frose was for some reason smiling brightly. It wasn't a sarcastic smile, nor was it a mask hiding her true feelings. It was simply a calm, nuanced smile.

With an "Excuse me," Alus left the office.

While making his way back to the laboratory, he couldn't help but wonder—just what did Frose know, and what didn't she? He was also puzzled by the cold, seething anger she'd directed at Tesfia, along with the mysterious smile afterwards.

Which was Frose's true face—the head of the family, or a mother?

No matter how much he thought about it, Alus, who'd had no parents, couldn't tell.

With the star of the show having left the principal's office, a relaxed atmosphere filled the room. "Even as someone without children, I found that a bit too awkward," Sisty finally spoke out, in an exasperated tone. These were words that showed her knowledge of Frose's past.

"You'll understand when you have children of your own..." Frose took a good sip of the now lukewarm tea and sighed. "I was in the military for too long... and so much time has passed."

When they realized it, the sun was already starting to set, with twilight approaching. The meeting with Alus hadn't taken that long, but considering the results, the time spent had been worth it.

"Now then, there's one more I'd like to meet with, but I suppose I should leave that for another day."

Frose stood up as if nothing had happened. But it wasn't like she hadn't gained anything. Her talk with Alus had helped her to make up her mind about a lot of things.

It also appeared that her biggest cause for concern would resolve itself in the best way possible. Her lips curled up into a sly smile at the thought.

"If you're just coming for a visit, you're welcome anytime. I'll even serve tea. It's not like we're strangers, after all."

"That's something you can say when you serve the tea yourself," Frose retorted, seeing as how Sisty had left everything to Selva.

Among the Three Pillars, Frose and Sisty had served as commander and top class Magicmaster respectively. They naturally were quite familiar with each other, and had teamed up often back when Frose was a Triple Digit.

"But that's true. Maybe I will come to visit once in a while."

*For a change of pace*, Frose thought to herself, but then Sisty held a finger to her lips as if to warn her. Her face turned expressionless, and Frose felt like the pause between her change in expression and her next words held a special meaning.

"Frose, that boy is special."

"It's been a while since I last saw that face... Ms. Witch."

In the next moment, the principal's usual mild expression returned to her face as if nothing had happened.

\* \* \*

*That wasn't like me*, Alus thought, and sighed to himself.

He walked through the darkened Institute grounds with slumped shoulders, wondering why he'd said something like that.

He wasn't supposed to care about what happened to Tesfia. He was supposed to rejoice if she left the Institute, celebrating the fact that he'd get more time for his research.

The reason he couldn't was because Tesfia and the others had already become part of his surroundings.

The declaration he'd made to Frose wasn't just a bluff; they could feel that the training was having results, which helped back up what they'd done and believed in. The two girls could feel exhilaration from their sense of accomplishment, but that was only a single factor out of many.

Thinking of Tesfia's verbal gaffe, Alus thought that they'd gotten too involved in his world.

However, Tesfia's words... "Why do I have to be blamed for rescuing a friend?" wouldn't leave his mind.



Like she said, nobody could blame her for that. However, that was still a naïve way of thinking, and she'd end up having to pay the price in the Outer World.

Her stance could be called too idealistic. Yes, it was beautiful but too straightforward.

That had been the case during the extracurricular lesson, too. Tesfia alone might have been able to escape from the spider Fiend. Even if she couldn't, she could at least have chosen to abandon that foolish supervisor earlier.

Not even Alus could save everyone from the tragic fate that would befall them.

Perhaps that was why he felt he shouldn't reject her for trying to reach that ideal. After he'd become the strongest, that was a path that he'd had to give up on. It was a path already closed to him, and one he'd never looked back on.

Yet she was clumsily trying to walk down it, despite all of her missteps.

It wasn't something that Alus should have allowed. She might experience pain for it someday, or someone else might have to pay the price.

But even then, she'd ultimately have to face her earnest feelings overflowing from within, and prove their righteousness by herself.

Yet... Yet even then, Tesfia was unreliable, acting with folly as she tightrope-walked down that path.

*That's the kind of girl she is.*

Alus smiled lightly as he reached the first floor entrance. He'd spotted some red hair hiding behind a nearby pillar.

As he made his way past, he put his hand on the head of that red-haired girl. "What are you doing?"

Tesfia appeared to be desperately trying to say something, her eyes red from crying. "... I'm sorry." That was all that she could meekly squeeze out.

"You're not trying to become a Magicmaster so you can say something like that. Well, you understand that better than anyone."

She quietly nodded.

The girls' dorm curfew was closing in, so Alus decided to escort Tesfia back first.

She tottered on behind him. A sorrowful expression clouded her face as she closely kept behind Alus. It wasn't like he couldn't understand why.

But it was something she had brought upon herself, after saying something a daughter should never say to her mother. "I'm not really one to say this, but let me teach you something."

After a while, Alus opened his mouth to continue. He might have even been talking to himself. "Villains getting what they deserve, or facing retribution for their actions, call it whatever you want—but killing is killing. While you might not be blamed for it, it's nothing to be proud of. Although others might have a thing or two they want to say about it, I think it's fine."

"..."

"At the very least, it's not something you need."

"But...!" Tesfia raised her voice to object.

"Let me finish."

Alus had apologized to Frose for getting Tesfia involved in the mission, but there was more to it. "From your point of view, it was to save Alice. Nobody would blame you for that. But that's different from the killing you talked about. When someone without the power to do so tries to do that, someone else is sure to die. This time, the Magicmasters on standby outside might have died for your sake. Well, I was with you, so I could cover for some of your recklessness."

In idealistic terms, not saving her best friend in that situation was the same as letting her die.

In the Outer World, that kind of decision was said to be their last bit of humanity. That kind of cold and cruel place was what the Outer World was like.

And perhaps those that lost that bit of humanity were no longer Magicmasters, or even human beings.

"But well, you can at least take pride in your actions themselves. All you're missing is the strength."

"...Mm."

For a little while, the quiet sobs of the girl rang out in the night.

Tesfia didn't calm down until the girls' dorm was in sight. "By the way, what did Mother say after that... am I really going to have to drop out?"

"No, that shouldn't happen, at least not in the near future. That's why you have to show off your potential at the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament."

"My potential?"

"In short, you just need to get strong. I don't mind either way, but... you want your mother to acknowledge you, right?" Alus ignored her sniffles, and spoke as calmly as he could.

Tesfia replied with a powerful, "Yeah!"

That was all it took for Alus to decide what he had to do. However, he hesitated to tell her what Frose had said at the end.

Tesfia picked up on that hesitation. "What? Did Mother say something else?" A tense, dark expression appeared on her face. Not leaving doubts like that unanswered was in the nature of those striving to become Magicmasters, as well as in Tesfia's personality.

"She asked me to take care of you... not that I understand what she meant by that." Were all the mothers in the world as vague as Frose? She'd mercilessly cornered her own daughter, yet at the end she showed a completely opposite sentiment.

But Tesfia's face visibly changed as she heard this. Her tension eased, and the shadow over her expression disappeared. "I see... so she said something like that..."

"She did. What about it?"

"No, it's nothing. Nothing at all..."

The two continued on in silence for a while.

When they were near the girls' dorm, Alus stopped. "You can get home on your own from here, right?"

"Yeah. Al, thanks for everything."

It wasn't quite the elegant manners you'd expect from nobility, but Tesfia said her thanks with a big smile on her face.

Alus quietly nodded back to her, and began walking back. But he left her with a few words as he turned away. "I'm going to be so hard on you tomorrow you'll want to cry. So brace yourself."

Tesfia waved goodbye to him.

*Now then.* With the sun fully set, Alus changed directions once the dorm was out of view, and headed in a different direction than the laboratory.

# Nineteenth Chapter

## Secret Feud

Alice and Tesfia had returned to the laboratory for more training, however, Tesfia left shortly thereafter, leaving only Alice and Loki.

Alice offered to go with Tesfia to the principal's office once they found out what happened, but Tesfia had run out on her own.

"Geez, how long are you going to sulk, Loki dear. Let's train together." Alice tried to cheer Loki up, but it was to no avail.

Alus had cajoled Loki into watching over Alice's training, and Loki was more or less an empty husk now.

However, she still hadn't reached sufficient results in her detection range expansion training, so Alus' decision was correct in a sense. After all, if she stayed behind, she might get some time to train on her own.

But Loki was too worried to focus on that. Tesfia's mother, or someone else related to the Fable family, was most likely at the principal's office that Alus had been called to. Considering his hatred for nobility, there was a high chance that they weren't getting along.

When the cause for the visit, Tesfia, returned, Loki had told her something in that regard. She was hoping it would help Alus. She didn't want him to end up playing the villain after getting swept up in Tesfia's problems.

"Say, Loki dear. Wouldn't it be terrible if Al said that he couldn't do anything when he comes back?"

"... That's true."

There was no vigor in Loki's voice. But she couldn't ignore Alus' will. For the time being, she told herself to do what she could for now.

Incidentally, Alice was struggling to focus too.

She hoped that Tesfia had met up with Alus after she ran out of the laboratory, but Alice couldn't help but worry that Alus and the others were in a predicament because of the incident in which she was caught up, and she wore her anxiety on her sleeve.

But she spoke out in a bright tone, in an attempt to hide this. "The magical tournament is coming up, so we should get ready for it."

"What's that?"

The Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament was a major event that students from all the nations participated in. It would normally be unthinkable for a student not to know of its existence, but Loki had only enrolled at the Institute to be by Alus' side, so maybe it was inevitable. She'd spent her life fighting Fiends, so it wouldn't be strange for her to be unaware of what went on at the Institute.

"It's a magical tournament for students that takes place after summer vacation. Haven't you heard of it?"

"No, I've never heard of it, and I'm not interested either."

"But it's a pretty big topic whenever it happens. It's even being broadcast, and after graduation..." Alice wanted to say that it could even decide where you were stationed, but stopped herself. That fact wouldn't matter much to Loki, who'd become Alus' partner out of her own volition. "I'm sure you'll be picked as a representative. The Institute's good name and the dignity of Alpha are at stake, after all. You shouldn't be able to withdraw unless there's a very good reason for it."

"Then I'll be fine. I have a perfectly good reason: taking care of Sir Alus."

"Hmm, I'm not sure about that..."

With the honor of the nation on the line, Alice was sure that reason would be rejected, but she scratched her cheek and smiled.

A selection committee had most likely already been formed, and they would be hard at work choosing the students that would participate.

As Alice thought about that, she suddenly realized something. "Oh, yes, Al might participate too."

"—!! You should've told me that first!"

"Al said he didn't want to participate. But Mr. Berwick was really enthused about it."

The selection of students was mostly up to the selection committee, but only ten students from each class year could participate.

It was reasonable to start off by choosing the five with the highest ranks, with everyone else being given an equal chance at the remaining slots through screening matches. This was the selection method the Second Magical Institute used. The institutes of other nations had other ways of choosing.

This was also the reason why there were still so many students present at the Institute, despite the summer vacation. It was a very narrow selection of only ten students per class year, and knowing the importance of the tournament, nobody ever voluntarily chose to step down. That was just how much attention the tournament garnered.

As a competition between nations, each country showed off its power at the tournament, as well as how effectively it was training its future Magicmasters.

Not only would the military be present, but it was an open secret that the nobility would watch the tournament with the hopes of finding partners for their children—to say nothing of all the political intrigue that would be at play. In short, they would be marking the excellent novice Magicmasters while they had the chance.

As such, there was a problem every year of each military trying to recruit the Magicmasters of other nations.

By law, students were given the choice of where they wanted to go. But this was frowned on by their homelands, and the negotiations between nations behind the scenes usually got heated.

That said, this kind of issue that risked straining diplomatic relations only happened with the most excellent of students.

If a student accepted the recruitment of another nation, it was standard for the recruiting nation to fairly compensate the other nation. It didn't have to be in money, either: the compensation could be in land, valuable Magicmasters, or other concessions.

There were also instances where two nations agreed to scout a single Magicmaster from the other's nation, in order to avoid any problems.

Either way, for all kinds of reasons, the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament was the perfect place for students striving to become Magicmasters to make their debut, and achieving impressive results was seen as a great honor.

"I would rather not, but if Sir Alus is participating, then I have no choice but to do so as well," Loki said, acting as if she didn't like it one bit, but Alice didn't overlook the sudden change in her attitude.

The small, silver-haired girl's eyes were now full of motivation. "But if I only train in detection... then I might even fail the selections, and only Sir Alus will be chosen..."

Loki panicked, imagining her own disappointing performance, her face turning pale as a sheet. But in reality she was already way ahead of the other first-year students, being an active duty Triple Digit Magicmaster. It was unthinkable that she wouldn't be chosen.

Flustered, Alice tried to smooth things over. "Uhm, I think you'll be fine with just how strong you are now, Loki dear."

Thanks to that, Loki was able to calm down a little. "T-That's true. If anything, you're the one who'd be at risk, Ms. Alice..."

"Wha—! You just looked at me with cold eyes, didn't you?!"

"Not at all... You're imagining things." Loki feigned ignorance, and returned to her training with a slight smile on her lips.

Time continued to pass, and night approached.

It appeared that Alus wouldn't fulfill his promise of coming home quickly before making Loki worry. Of course, there was a difference between what Alus and Loki considered 'quick.'

After about an hour had passed, the unease on Loki's face was growing visibly worse. "Why isn't Sir Alus back yet?"

"Yes, I wonder why." Alice gracefully brushed off Loki's frustrated words.

"Maybe they were rude to him... I feel like I'll need to have a long and hard talk with the Fable family."

"I think you should reconsider that..."

Loki pulled out two knives and scraped their blades against each other, making an intimidating sound. She didn't actually have any intention of going that far, but she couldn't help feeling uneasy that Alus was in danger somewhere out of sight.

She was fortunate to have Alice around to alleviate her pent-up frustration, but her endurance was wearing thin despite that.

So when the doorbell rang out, letting them know there was a visitor, it came at the worst possible time.

Alus wouldn't have bothered to ring the bell. He'd just come on inside. Having whipped herself up into a frenzy, Loki cast a violent glare at the door.

Alice did her best to hold Loki back, and deal with their guest. When she saw the person outside appear on the screen, she rushed to open the door.

"What is the matter, Feli?"

"Oh, if it isn't Alice. Good timing."

"Well, it's not really good timing at all..." Alice replied with a dry laugh, and pointed behind herself.

"... What's with her?"

"Al was called out by Fia's mother, and he hasn't come back yet."

"You mean Ms. Frose? So neither Mr. Alus nor Fia is in right now?"

"Did you have some business with them? If it's not urgent, I can tell them when they come back."

Felinella appeared to hesitate for a moment. As a maiden in love, she wished she could see Alus' face if possible, but because of her business this time around, she held back her personal feelings.

"Hmm, then perhaps I can ask you to deliver a message. It concerns the two of you, as well."

Loki's ferociousness had already calmed down, and she worked on welcoming their guest. This was Alus' guest, so she had to keep up appearances.

As Loki placed cold drinks and snacks down on the table, Felinella told them, "I've been chosen as one of the committee members for the upcoming tournament, and I came here to tell you what was decided at the first meeting. Alice, you, Fia and Loki will represent the first-year class."

"...!! Really?!" Alice exclaimed.

"Yes. Practical skills are prioritized the most, so we can't overlook the top scorers of the first term. The two of you will accept, right?"

"Of course. I'm sure Fia will, too."

"I will accept if Sir Alus does."

Felinella had been all smiles, but when Alus' name was brought up, a slight gloom appeared on her face. "I'd of course love to have Mr. Alus take part in the tournament... I even have orders from above, but..."

Loki was smiling brightly, but Felinella's evasive tone caused both her and Alice to look at her questioningly.

"With Mr. Alus' grades, there are a lot of objections within the committee, and it doesn't look like I can get him in."

"Excuse me?! Those fools just don't understand Sir Alus' strength!"

"I wouldn't call them fools... i-it's just that the principal is making sure Mr. Alus' rank is kept confidential."

"So Al manipulating his grades backfired," Alice said.

"That's right."

The selection process of the committee was designed to ensure that no shame would be brought on the Institute, prompting them to pick model students. Because of this, test results were also taken into consideration in the decisions.

The practical exam was the largest factor, but with the tournament being so prestigious, an emphasis was placed on being impartial to ensure there would be no objections. That was also why half of the slots were decided through screening matches.

"Does that mean that Sir Alus can't participate? In that case, I won't either."

"...!! Wait a minute! It just means that he can't get in through the selection committee's recommendation. I'm sorry, but he'll have to get in through the screening matches."

In other words, Felinella felt bad about having to make Alus waste his time with the matches. Of course, she had the idea of going through the principal instead, but the tournament was set up to look like it was run primarily by the student body.

Moreover, only a tiny number of students knew of Alus' true strength. And the screening matches were the only way to get the other students to accept his participation.

"So could you tell Mr. Alus and Fia about this?"

"Oka—"

"I understand. I will let Sir Alus know!"

Alice had been answering Felinella in a carefree manner when Loki interrupted her. It appeared she had no intention of letting anyone else tell Alus.

"Since you're still first years, I'm sure there are a lot of things you don't understand yet, but don't worry. Once all the participants have been decided, we're going to gather you all and give an overall explanation."

"All right. You're participating too, right, Feli?"

"Of course. Not to boast, but the selection committee is comprised of students with excellent grades who have already been chosen to participate. Normally, it's a third-year's job though." Since she might come off as arrogant if she continued any further, Felinella stopped herself at that.

As someone who was at the top of the Institute's rankings, aside from certain exceptions, as well as being exceedingly popular, it was only natural that this job would fall to Felinella. The Socalent family's status as nobility also worked in her favor, making her admired by students of both genders.

"But as vacation started a lot of things happened, so it ended up falling behind schedule." Felinella sighed, apologizing to the two for being so late getting in touch with them.



A sudden question came to Alice's mind. "The tournament doesn't start until October, right? I would think that's plenty of time to prepare, but is that still considered behind schedule?"

"Yes. Not only does the selection take time, but there's separate training too. The event is the same as always—individual matches. But the participants still spend the time until the tournament doing special training. Last year was so busy, there was no time to take a break."

It also started up at a bad time. Normally, it would be best if they began before summer vacation, but that was when the Institute held its exams. So as a result, preparations didn't begin until vacation time started.

With students going home during vacation, the committee was swamped with work making preparations every year. Even after all the participants were selected, there would be some leeway as far as time went, but this year they couldn't move right away because of the attack on the Institute.

Their only saving grace was in the simplicity of the event. It was mock battles, the same as the ones they held during class, though the scale was on a different level with it being the tournament's official event. In order to bring it closer to real life, bringing one's own AWR and the use of projectile weaponry was allowed, as well as most weapons used in battle against Fiends.

However, Felinella had another concern, and that was the fact that the Second Magical Institute hadn't been winning any tournaments in recent years.

Not only was the selection committee making victory the top priority, but Sisty had told Felinella the same thing. The principal was likely also being pressured from those above her.

With Alus, Alpha had been able to show fierce results on the battlefield, but when it came to the tournament, the nation was in the lower ranks. The top brass felt humiliated by this.

In order to prevent the other nations from thinking Alpha's recent contributions were simply due to momentum, they wanted to show off overwhelming power at least once.

The nations were in a cooperative relationship, on paper at least—but they had different infrastructures, organizations, and so on. The only thing they were truly together on was protecting Babel and humanity from Fiends.

So the Friendship Magical Tournament was the perfect place to display their national prestige and secure a higher standing.

Felinella was also looking to win, and was being careful in her selections. If Alus were to participate, then the first years would absolutely achieve great results, and the points they would get from him would be high enough to have a realistic shot at victory.

If there were any problems, it would be with the third years. Even if they were excellent, if the work was being left up to a second year like Felinella, trust in the third years wasn't very high. Those who weren't excellent were

unreliable, and those who were excellent had their hands full, with their station in the military already decided.

Moreover, there were some students who were partially exempt from lectures and were temporarily enlisted with the military to get some combat training.

Felinella pondered what to do, but she wasn't going to come up with any good ideas by hanging around the laboratory. And by the time she noticed, the three cups were already empty.

It wasn't until Loki spoke that she realized how much time had passed. "The sun is about to set, but will you wait until Sir Alus comes back? Dinner isn't ready yet, but I would like to begin preparations soon."

"Ah—it's already this late?! I'm sorry, I have a lot of things to do after this." Felinella turned down Loki's dinner invitation with a wry smile. She appeared to be rather flustered, which was rare for her.

Loki, on the other hand, was regretting not noticing it sooner. "I see. Next time, maybe."

"Thank you. I will certainly take you up on your offer the next time."

Loki's words were blunt compared to the ladylike Felinella, but Felinella knew that there was true kindness in them.

When Loki and Alice saw her off, Felinella turned around, recalling something with her hand on the doorknob. "Oh, I almost forgot, the screening matches are just after the summer vacation. Please tell Mr. Alus that too."

"Got it."

"We'll make sure to tell him," Alice added, with a smile.

Once the door closed behind Felinella and she was out of view, Alice exhaled and relaxed, as if she'd been a little nervous. "That's Feli for you. Everything she does is so graceful."

"That just goes to show that she's aware of her noble status."

The two thought of a certain someone, and exchanged giggles.

"Oh, I think Fia is pretty aware of it as well," Alice said.

"Yes, that awareness appears to be the only thing she has, however," Loki replied.

Both of them knew how different nobles could be. Although Loki seemed to be more mischievous, Alice was more considerate of differing circumstances.

Thinking about it, Tesfia should have met up with Alus, so she would be back later as well. That made Alice uneasy too, but she chose not to say anything until Loki settled down.

"What about you, Ms. Alice? Why don't you stay for dinner?"

"Hmm, if I eat now I might not make it back to the dorm in time for curfew, so I'll have to pass. But I can help you prepare it."

Thanks to Felinella's unexpected visit, Loki had been distracted from her worries; and Alice, wanting to stay by Loki's side a little longer, offered to help with dinner.

\* \* \*

Alus was currently in the darkest place in the Institute.

A mild night wind blew through the leaves of the trees. Beneath the grove it was pitch black, a darkness darker than night. Even the sound of footsteps on dirt were louder in this enclosed copse.

The Institute didn't make full use of the entirety of its vast grounds. Especially around its outer circumference.

This was a place where students didn't normally go. But Alus spoke out, as if he was talking to someone. "Well, Mr. Selva? You said you had some business with me."

Instead of an answer, a shadow appeared from out of the darkness. As the artificial moon peeked out from behind the clouds, the elderly butler stepped out. Moonlight shone through the tree branches, lighting up the grove.

Selva had his hands behind his back, the same smile as before still on his face. Keeping his distance, he elegantly bowed and said, "I'm sorry for calling you out here."

The space between the two wasn't meant for speaking.

No, this distance was for...

"Surely you didn't call me out to a deserted place like this for some idle talk?"

"It is just as you say."

"Is it still about Fia?"

"As a butler serving the Fable family, I am always worried for the young miss. Even if these might be my personal feelings, in the past she was so simplistic and always smiling."

"So not any different from now, then."

Simplistic might have been a bit too harsh, but that was without a doubt one of Tesfia's good traits. Of course, that impulsive and straightforward side of hers had caused Alus quite a bit of trouble as well.

Living true to yourself was truly a difficult thing, and at times, Alus saw her as more human and free than he was.

"That is why I am grateful to you, Mr. Alus. You have created a path for the young miss to remain herself after all."

"I do think it was a bit forced though. I'm not really used to that kind of thing."

Saying that he held his ground against the renowned Frose sounded nice on paper, but in the end he'd even resorted to using unnecessary provocation. Thinking back on it after calming down, he still couldn't get a read on her.

"Please don't worry about it," Selva said, expressing his personal opinion. "If your difficult words go too far, there are times when you forget for whose sake they were said. And I am sure that there are times when you need to reflect on that. Ultimately, I feel that your meeting was a good one for the young miss."

“And you called me out here to confirm that?”

Selva nodded. “After speaking with a person twice, I can get a general grasp of their character. After three times, I can tell where their true feelings lie. And then I can base my trust on how they are perceived by those around them.”

For normal people it was difficult to see through someone’s personality, and this short time definitely wasn’t enough to build up the trust needed to place someone important under their care. But Selva was different.

“Normally, that would have been enough for me. I know that you could be trusted if not for that dark side that lurks within you. I am sure you are already aware of it... but that darkness is a point of concern for me.”

The nuance in Selva’s tone made it sound like he thought it might be unnecessary meddling on his part.

“I see, so you want to ascertain that. I don’t have any objections. Well, I seldom meet anyone from your line of work in this day and age.”

“I washed my hands of that quite a long time ago. It’s in the past. However... erasing what has been ingrained in me seems impossible.”

“Agreed. I don’t believe I could erase it either.”

People who made a living by killing had a unique atmosphere to them. The assassination techniques bled into their every movement.

It was thanks to Alus’ cultivated senses that he was able to notice. Normally, Magicmasters stepping into the Outer World wouldn’t be wary of their fellow man.

However, when Selva was leading him to the principal’s office, Alus saw his movements and could smell someone in his line of work hidden in them.

That same thing held true for Alus, which was why each of them had picked up on the other.

Alus said, “Rather than speaking of trust on our first meeting, this way is easier for both of us.”

“That’s right.”

They faced off, not as Magicmasters, but as murderers... they didn’t need any justification as their natures moved their bodies.

Alus was currently unarmed, but whether he had his AWR or not wouldn’t matter in this fight.

Selva knew that as well, and he’d simply chosen this grove of trees because it was out of the way and no one would happen upon them.

The two stood at a reasonable distance from one another, each sizing the other up.

However, there was no hostility or hatred in the air. This was simply a battle of techniques, for which they’d both given their tacit approval.

Unlike Alus who had taken a pose ready to strike, Selva was standing at attention. He didn’t seem to be doing anything, nor did it look like he was awaiting Alus’ move.

Yet Alus’ senses told him that Selva had indeed done something. “—!!”

Under the faint moonlight, something in Selva’s atmosphere shimmered.

When Alus strained his eyes, he saw many silk-like thin threads rolling through the air, coming from the fingers Selva held behind his back.

At the same time that he became aware of this, he crouched down and left the spot at high speed.

Super-thin threads, just barely perceivable, approached Alus from the left and right. But he knew that they were no normal strings.

After all—they'd just cut straight through the leaves that had been kicked up into the air as Alus moved, as if they weren't even there.

It was an attack of threads so sharp that they didn't make a sound as they cut. Selva must have already prepared his attack by the time Alus noticed. And he struck at the moment that Alus focused directly on him.

"I see. Threads of mana, is it?"

"Well perceived." Selva politely bowed. "I am impressed."

Like with Alus' mana blade, mana had several uses and could take on other shapes at will. But it wasn't a technique that was as easy as it sounded. This thread form was something Alus hadn't seen before, so that alone made it clear that Selva wasn't an ordinary Magicmaster.

*It's those gloves.*

The gloves weren't so much a magical tool as they were a prototype AWR. It was an older version, before AWRs as such were made, with the goal of interfering with mana. Unlike AWRs that served as support for constructing spells, Selva's gloves specialized in altering the shape of mana.

"That move of yours is pretty interesting."

"This has always been the most simple way... magic tends to stand out, after all," Selva replied.

As the construction of spells used mana as energy, they could be detected at that stage by those with sharp senses. So when it came to quick and difficult-to-recognize attacks, altering the shape of mana for use as a weapon was better.

The ability to freely create lethal weaponry through mana control might be the very essence of personal combat techniques.

Alus was a little happy that someone other than him had paid heed to mana control. The notion of turning mana into thread, as well as the high levels of technique involved, exhilarated him.

Just how long had it been since he'd had a simple test of strength like this? Alus' hands restlessly began to twitch. After firmly closing his fists, mana blades formed over the backs of his hands.

Alus ran forward, with the occasional feint thrown in, at blistering speeds that a normal person would be unable to even see, his arms trailing behind him.

Selva released the hands he held behind his back, thrusting one of his hands forward, skillfully manipulating the mana threads.

Five threads of even width flew towards Alus like claws.

Normally, it would be impossible to see all of Selva's mana threads with the naked eye. But Alus' senses and abnormal mana perception, trained

from his time in the Outer World, had changed his vision. He didn't perceive what tore through the air as threads, but as flows of mana.

And being so intensely focused, he could perfectly differentiate between the mana he exuded and all foreign mana.

*Should I block them? No...*

Alus still didn't completely understand the nature of the mana threads. But he realized that it would be a little too unnatural for it to simply be mana turned into the shape of thread. Since he didn't know how the threads would change after being blocked, doing anything careless would be dangerous.

He considered how the battle would play out, and immediately saw his next few steps. He decided to dodge by taking a single step to the right.

But before his foot even reached the ground, he knew that he'd been taken in.

His decision to dodge was in part because he was cautious of Selva's right hand still held behind his back, but Selva must have accounted for even that.

Sensing the flow of mana beneath his foot, Alus leaped off the ground and swung his mana blade down. At the same time, a mana thread sprung up like a trap.

The mana thread's course was diverted by his mana blade, scraping and flying right past Alus' nose.

*Its nature changed! I see, so that's how it is.* Once the thread had been used for its purpose, its nature could be changed at the user's will.

With the sound of a thread snapping above his head, another trap was unleashed.

The thread that flew upwards was cut through by threads woven together above Alus.

Threads woven into a net came slamming down from above. The net of threads was supported by another thread that was pulled as taut as it could. When that tension was released, the net flew down toward the ground at high speed.

Selva's only miscalculation was not taking Alus' almost inhuman body movements into account. Without even looking up at the net, Alus made his next move.

And it wasn't just Alus. Having swiftly realized his misstep, Selva stepped back in preparation for Alus' next move, moving at a speed unthinkable for his age.

In the blink of an eye, Alus closed in on Selva, getting close enough to touch him with his mana blade.

He would surely reach Selva's body with the minimum of movement in the next second. A slight smirk appeared on his face as he thrust his hand forward to stab the elderly butler's abdomen.

However, he didn't feel the sensation of tearing through flesh. Instead, it felt like the blade had been stuck into several layers of wire.

At the same time, the counterfeit information was undone, revealing that Alus had stabbed what was essentially a puppet woven from mana threads.

Surprisingly enough, the real Selva stood behind the fake, using the mana threads to spread counterfeit information to create a dummy. It wasn't a magic spell, but rather mastery in mana control, which meant that such mastery contained infinite possibilities.

“—!!”

The loosening threads scattered in all directions, trying to surround Alus. The threads were too close to evade, and there were too many of them.

But Alus still readied his mana blades, and jumped backwards.

The ends of the invisible threads stretched out like tentacles, attempting to wrap around Alus' body. Without even blinking, Alus moved his arms and rapidly took the threads down. He didn't deflect them, but took it a step further and cut them down.

Selva's eyes shot open. “This is the first time anyone has cut through my thread attack, rather than simply blocking it,” he said, sounding somewhat amused.







However, not even Alus could cut down all of the threads. When he landed and caught his breath, he noticed that a scratch had drawn blood from his cheek. "When it comes to mana control, I can't afford to fall behind after all," Alus retorted, accepting Selva's praise.

At the same time, he noticed that his mana blades' integrity had been compromised. While they weren't real metal blades, having cut down so many of those sharp threads, they'd been worn down considerably. Making the blades sharper had reduced their strength.

Alus undid the mana blades for a moment, and rolled his shoulders.

"What is the matter, Mr. Alus? Shall we continue?" Selva asked with a big smile.

Threads had already surrounded Alus to the point where there was no gap large enough for a person to pass through. They were all part of the threads that had made up the dummy, and all remained connected to Selva's gloves.

Selva flicked his finger, and the threads let out a high-pitched noise. The threads were then firmly pulled tight without any slack, using the branches of the surrounding trees to weave a web, enclosing Alus.

Yet Alus' expression remained unchanged. "I've just about warmed up."

"Understood."

After having politely signaled the restart of the fight, the threads moved in accordance with Selva's fingers, one at a time. The threads in the web around Alus began to move, slashing towards him. If they all hit, Alus would be cut to pieces.

Truly, a logical method of attack, Alus thought to himself. It must have been the result of pursuing the force necessary to end a life with the highest possible chance of success.

Selva was skilled enough to wrap up a job in a single moment, to the point of killing so fast that the target himself would be unaware of it.

One after another, the threads freely swished through the air as they rapidly closed in on Alus. They filled the spaces between the trees and blended in with the darkness, not leaving any room for Alus to run through.

But as long as there was enough space to take a couple of steps...

Alus could feel all of the sharp, thin threads approaching, and dodged them.

He took half a step, crouched, and somersaulted backwards, escaping through the smallest of gaps. With even a single miss being fatal, Alus' heart felt like it was dancing as he moved his body.

He kept count of the approaching threads in his mind, and once there were only a few left he ran towards Selva. Spinning his body, he dodged a thread coming from below, and using the momentum of his spin he cut down another thread flying towards his chest.

After taking another step—Alus suddenly stopped.

The next moment, like a guillotine, sharp threads passed through where he would have been had he taken a second step. If he'd continued like normal, he would have been unable to dodge it.

Alus easily weaved between the following mana threads that seemed to have anticipated that he'd escape, and started running again.

*Was that all of them? ... Not yet.*

He'd wanted to close in on the unmoving Selva right away, but he closely observed the movements of his fingers.

Five meters away, Alus bent his head and slid across the ground without slowing down. With a *swish*, the final thread approaching Alus from behind grazed the back of his neck.

Thus, Alus had evaded Selva's web in an instant, and turned the tables on him.

As he rose from the slide, Alus thrust his mana blade against Selva's torso.

This time, he was in range of the real one for sure... however, at the same time, Alus' arm was wrapped in mana threads preventing it from moving any further. But at this distance, if he sacrificed his arm, he could easily finish him off with the other.

"Mr. Selva, why don't we stop here?"

"Yes, I admit defeat."

"Then let's wrap it up. There's no winning or losing while we're holding back."

Selva had put on a show when cutting the leaves, but that was the only time his threads were lethal. The threads he used for attacking after that, and even the threads now wrapped around Alus' arm, weren't sharp enough to cut someone through. Even a direct hit would only leave a welt.

"... So you saw through me." Selva had maintained a calm expression throughout the entire battle. He had never had any killing intent.

The threads wrapped around Alus' arm dispersed, as did Alus' own mana blades.

Selva put a leg back, held his hand against his chest, and lowered his head. "Mr. Alus, please forgive me for the rudeness of testing you."

"I don't mind. I'm the one who took you up on it... besides, I can understand your concerns," Alus said in self-deprecation.

He felt Selva was justified in his actions. He was a loyal servant of Tesfia's, and he also saw her as his own daughter. So there was no way he'd overlook her being taught techniques by someone who in part made his living through killing, especially not after that incident.

"I do not wish for the young miss to be stained in the colors of this side."

"You should know just as well as me that Fia won't be stained so easily, Mr. Selva. It seems you have a tendency to spoil her, and I'll say this since you seem to be aware of it too, but... I have no intention of teaching Fia any dark techniques. She's not suited for them, anyway."

Selva accepted Alus' frank opinion with a smile, and waited for him to continue.

"She'll find her own path to walk down, and she won't let up on any effort needed to walk down it. That's why, regardless of how it turned out, she was able to confront her mother... though her words themselves were problematic."

"... That is true. The young miss made her own decision. Like mother, like daughter, I suppose. To be honest, that was the first time I've seen the young miss talk back to Master Frose. Her choice of words aside," Selva said, with a wry, exasperated smile. He seemed to have realized that she didn't mean her words to come out the way they did.

"So returning to the matter at hand—how was I? I'm rarely the one being evaluated, so I'm pretty interested in the result."

Selva let out a good-hearted chuckle. "The young miss is truly blessed with friends."

Alus could tell that Selva wasn't saying that due to his position as a butler, but that he really meant it. It wasn't a direct assessment, but Selva's primary worries had already been alleviated.

"I am sorry for taking up your time."

"No worries, it was time well spent for me too. But why don't we do it for real next time, Mr. Selva?"

"Surely you jest? I am a butler of the Fable family. If not for the family's sake, I would like to keep it at this. I can feel my age catching up to me."

Contrary to his words, there was still confidence in the smile Selva wore, but Alus nodded in acceptance.

After that, Selva mentioned that he was keeping his master waiting, and blended in with the darkness the same way he'd appeared.

Speaking of keeping people waiting—so was Alus. He realized that as soon as Selva disappeared. "... I guess this is pretty bad."

He hurried back home, but the clock was already past eight by the time he arrived at the laboratory.

Thus, after receiving an earful from Loki, he was made to give her a long report of what had happened in the principal's office.

Meanwhile, while Selva was absent...

Someone was seated in a parked magic car, gathering her thoughts with her eyes closed. Though her thinking was interrupted when the door was opened.

Having appeared out of nowhere, Selva announced his return to his master. "Please excuse my late arrival."

With her legs crossed, as if tired of waiting, Frose urged her butler to give his report. "So, how was he?"

"To be frank, I cannot estimate him. It appears that I am not skilled enough to do so..." Selva started the magic car as he summarized his battle against Alus. "He is of the new generation. Taking into account fighting

with magic, I am unable to see the depths of his abilities. Moreover, he has a wealth of experience in fighting against people."

"I imagine that is why you asked him for a match."

Frose listened to Selva's words, understanding the circumstances behind them. He had poked a hornet's nest, but what came out was something far more frightening and mysterious.

"Still, it's rare for you to praise someone so much... to think someone could impress the former head of Afeluca, the executive unit that reported directly to the sovereign."

"Master Frose, that was a long time ago. And there was another at the top as well."

"Was there now?"

"If they are still alive, that is." Selva showed a rare bitter expression as he remembered the past.

"Well then, if not even you could measure him, perhaps we should probe Alus Reigin from another direction. Selva..."

Having somewhat forcibly turned the topic back on track, Frose felt expectation rise from within as she received her license from Selva. She opened a channel to speak with a certain person. Even after retiring, she still had her license so she could communicate with her people inside the military.

Of course, the license only proved her status as a former general, with no ranking as a Magicmaster attached to it. When Frose retired, her ranking was returned to the military, effectively removing her Magicmaster status.

"I'm making a call."

"Understood," Selva replied as he glanced at the rear-view mirror, and pressed a button by his hand. When he did so, a soundproof partition rose up, isolating the back seat from the front seat.

It was already late, but not late enough for it to be a problem. *I just hope she's not on a mission*, Frose thought, as she pressed her license to her ear.

The call tone rang out a few times before finally connecting. There was a lot of noise in the background, but the person's voice came through clearly.

"Hello, hello. What's up, Ms. F?" The voice belonged to a young woman and sounded casual and indifferent.

"I'm sorry for calling so suddenly. Are you perhaps in the middle of a mission?"

"Yeah, but they're all weaklings I can handle with one hand, so it's no problem."

Frose was speaking to one of Alpha's two Singles, Lettie Kultunca.

The first impression of her was that of a friendly, carefree woman, but if you treated her that way, you'd surely have the rug pulled out from under you. The Singles ranking was filled with nothing but those with extreme talent and abnormal dispositions. They were all monsters in their own right.

Frose's cheek twitched as she imagined Lettie acting the same as usual. She appeared to be in the midst of battle, but was taking things at her own pace, as if she was taking a break during training.

If Lettie had the same look as she did the last time they met, she had reddish-brown hair that reached her shoulders, with the exception of the hair at the nape of her neck, which reached down to her waist. She'd be 24 this year, and was ranked No. 7 among the Magicmasters.

Was she currently firing off magic indiscriminately at the moment...?

The two had been on friendly terms ever since Lettie had been under Frose's command before becoming a Single, and had been sent on a number of missions to eliminate Fiends.

Frose had been charmed by her tomboyish side, but Lettie was also someone who was easy to talk to. In terms of rank they had been equals, but in reality Lettie was treated as above Frose due to her abilities. Anyway, she was the person closest to Frose after Sisty.

If she really was in the middle of a mission Frose should probably apologize and call again another day, but when she imagined Lettie fighting, there was a high chance that she really was having as easy a time as she said.

Sisty had only been a Single for less than half a year, but Lettie had held on to her rank as No. 7 since she reached it years ago.

Frose could definitely see Lettie slaying Fiends with one hand, and when it came to Lettie, worrying that she was getting in the way was pointless.

"Then, can I perhaps have some of your time... there is something I'd like to ask."

"Sure, 'bout what?"

"Does the name Alus Reigin sound familiar?"

"... 'Course. Allie's really cute, isn't he?"

She answered in such a lazy tone that Frose couldn't help but wonder if she really was in the middle of a fight. Of course, Frose had no way of knowing that Lettie's expression was perfectly relaxed.

"He's the cutest and strongest. That's Alpha's secret weapon for you. So info about him has finally reached you too, huh?"

*Less reached and more delivered*, Frose thought to herself. She had only asked if she knew his name, and not only had she admitted it, but she'd leaked even more information to Frose. Yet her exasperation only lasted for a moment.

"Knowing you, you'll find any information you want, right? But Ms. F—don't meddle too much with him, okay?"

"—!! And why is that?" Frose nervously asked, as Lettie's tone of voice changed. This was the second warning she'd received.

"Allie's all mine."

Lettie gave an answer that almost made Frose lose her motivation. Her ominous words from before also sounded now like they'd been made in jest.

“What does that mean, are the two of you dating?” Since Frose didn’t know how serious Lettie was being, she could only carefully try to confirm.

“Course not. But I can take it easy and not have to fight a bunch of Fiends as long as Allie is around.”

“I-I see...”

Frose tried to sound calm, but even she couldn’t hide how shaken she was by this.

Lettie should have been deployed at the recently established foothold of the Vanalis region in the west of the Covent continent for the last six months or so.

In order to reclaim the continent and cities that had been abandoned over a century ago, the high-classed Fiends that lived there needed to be exterminated. In preparation for that, they had to first do the mind-numbingly boring job of reducing the number of low-classed Fiends as much as possible.

By reclaiming Vanalis, they could work together with the neighboring nations to expand their territory even further. It was a worthy assignment for a Single.

“Well, jokes aside, even the Governor-General has trouble handling Allie, so you should try not to get on his bad side. I’ve heard the Governor-General gripe about how hard he is to predict, though.”

“So he’s just that valuable to the military.”

“... Ms. F, you really don’t know, do you?”

Lettie was calling her ignorant in a roundabout fashion, but Frose didn’t take offense. It had been a long time since she’d retired. There was surely a lot that Lettie knew that she didn’t, considering the constantly changing state of the military.

While they were on friendly terms, Frose wasn’t confident that she could see through the depths of Lettie’s personality. After all, no matter how carefree she appeared, she was a monstrous Single Digit Magicmaster.

The sounds of fighting continued in the background, but Lettie’s voice contained no panic.

Instead it was Frose who felt impatient, her military background telling her to end the call before the battle grew larger in scale. “Then his abilities...”

“Sorry, Ms. F. It’s getting a little tough with one hand, so I’m going to hang up.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry for calling you during a mission.”

“Feel free to call anytime you want.”

Lettie ended the call with a “Later” and hung up, leaving behind only a confused Frose.

It felt like pieces of the puzzle gleaned from her impressions and Selva’s impressions, forming the truth behind the abilities of the young man known as Alus, had exploded once she started putting them together, making whatever clues she’d had useless.

She simply couldn't tell what position he was in. He was clearly no normal student, but she couldn't determine how to handle him.

For the time being, she signaled Selva that she was done, and leaned back in her seat.

Frose stared out the window to calm her racing mind, but she was unable to gather her thoughts.

However... even then.

She just might have gotten the kind of information she had hoped for, and a smile appeared on her face. Her expectations had been betrayed in a good way.

Frose had hoped to find a solution that would maintain the Fable family and respect Tesfia's wishes. And it appeared that she wouldn't be able to stop Tesfia from receiving further guidance from Alus as part of her plan.

That's why Frose could see a path form to a certain future. "That he's not a noble should work out in our favor," the Fable family head murmured to herself in the back of the magic car.

The only one who heard her was Selva in the driver's seat.



## Twentieth Chapter

### Industrial City Folen

Having returned from his match with Selva, Alus had a late dinner that Loki had prepared with Alice and then reheated.

Normally it was silent during dinner time, but today Loki spoke up. That was because Felinella, who'd stopped by while Alus was out, had left a message for him.

"... And that's why she wants you to take part in the selection matches in September, Sir Alus."

"..."

*What kind of harassment is this, Alus thought to himself.*

He didn't want to participate in the tournament, but after his talk with Berwick, he was willing to accept it. But now the selection matches too?

Whenever he dealt with one problem, another popped up to take its place, endlessly tearing away at his precious time. It was like having a wrench thrown into gears that were finally getting started.

That said, Alus' grades were objectively average. They were definitely not good enough to be chosen as a representative. Even then, he'd expected that Sisty would manage to force him in somehow.

"Selection matches, huh..."

Thinking about it, holding selection matches for those not chosen for their grades was logical. Aside from those who excelled at the Institute, matches like these were optimal when it came to giving all the other students a fair and equal chance.

At any rate, Alus braced himself for the loss in research time these selection matches would cause him.

The only problem was that Loki, as well as his two students Alice and Tesfia, had already been chosen, and that threatened to ruin his entire training schedule.

So far, he'd focused on having them train their mana control to more effectively use spells, but if he would need to hurriedly throw together a training menu for fighting people, he'd end up skipping several steps of his planned schedule.

Would the girls be able to keep up with that?

Tesfia in particular had already made her declaration to Frose. She'd need to shift toward training for the tournament sooner or later regardless.

"Then will you be changing the training menu for those two?" Loki, having put the pieces together and understood what had happened at the principal's office and why, asked this with an unreadable expression.

Loki was secretly displeased because she thought all of this was only putting further burdens on Alus. But seeing that he wasn't even furrowing his brow, she calmed down by telling herself that it was all in the past.

"I'd like to spend more time on each step, but considering the time left until the tournament we'll have to follow a strict schedule."

His participation had been decided during his negotiations with Berwick, followed by the incident with Tesfia, and now he had selection matches to contend with as well. The situation was ever-changing.

Once dinner was over, Alus stood by the kitchen sink and took a sip of the iced tea that Loki made to help him relax. "Damn, I think I might work myself to death..." he said, having remade his schedule taking everything that had happened into account.

"Don't worry. If that happens, I will accompany you... or rather, I will do everything in my power to keep that from happening," Loki remarked jokingly, having just finished doing the dishes. With a bright smile on her face, she kept to her same-old, and possibly never-changing, way of thinking.

"And did you know?" Loki tugged at the tired Alus' sleeve with a smile. She wanted to at least give him the good news.

After listening to Felinella, Alus' silver-haired partner looked up information about the tournament, and learned something that put a smile on her face.

"If you win the tournament..." Loki stood on tiptoes to reach Alus, who had a blank expression, and brought her beautiful lips towards his face. She was close enough that her breath tickled his ear. "You will receive mithril."

"Really?!" Alus stared straight at Loki with a spark in his eyes, as if he'd come back to life.

With a slight blush, the girl nodded.

She put her heels back on the ground, and continued, "Or rather, it appears the trophy is made out of mithril."

"I see, and if we melt it down, we'll be able to get our hands on a decent chunk of it!"

When it came to making AWRs, mithril was a first-rate material. It was extraordinarily valuable compared to celestment, which was the material typically used for AWRs.

That said, Alus was wealthy enough for the cost to not be a problem... so why was he so excited? It was because, price aside, it rarely appeared on the market. As it could only be obtained from a mine far out in the Outer World, it was rare enough for Alus to go this entire year without being able to find any for sale in the markets, despite actively checking for it.

Magicmasters would need to be sent out to help gather it, with their lives at stake, so even the cost of labor was extreme.

Moreover, high-classed Fiends had been confirmed in the area around the mine, forcing most people to abandon hopes of finding any for the year. And even when it was somehow obtained, it was usually taken to the nations closest to the mine.

As such, since Alpha was so distant from the mine, mithril rarely ever entered circulation here.

Incidentally, there was also a material that exceeded even mithril.

Alus' Night Mist was made of that material, which was usually called meteor metal. This material was said to have been created with lost technology, and was even rarer than mithril.

The term 'meteor metal' didn't strictly refer to just a single metal. It was used for metals that were currently impossible to analyze using modern technology, and that couldn't be manufactured or mined. Those were the metals that were given this name.

Their properties varied greatly, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that every one of them was unique.

The name 'meteor' was used, as if to suggest that the metals were gifts from the heavens themselves.

Their worth couldn't be put in numbers, and it normally would belong to whoever discovered it, or the rights would be given to the military. In Alus' case, he had been the one to discover it, and because he'd retaken the continent, he was given a portion as a reward.

Aside from the exception that was meteor metal, mithril was the undisputed greatest material for AWRs.

"... Actually, thinking about it, won't that being the reward only increase the risk of me being worked to death?"

For a moment, Alus entertained the thought of how easy things would be if he abandoned everything. In fact, he might have to rethink the pros and cons of the tournament.

"It's okay... you will be participating, won't you, Sir Alus?" Loki smiled as if it was already set in stone.

Wanting to avoid making an immediate decision, Alus considered the mithril and the reward that Berwick had promised.

While he'd receive a separate reward of ten rare books from other nations, he admonished himself so that he wouldn't make a careless decision. Considering the reward, Berwick likely wouldn't settle for anything less than a victory for Alpha's Second Magical Institute.

Alus put the books and the mithril he'd get as a reward on an imaginary scale and measured it against the time he'd waste, including the selection matches.

In his mind, he could see the scales wavering back and forth. Eventually it started tilting toward the outcome he favored the most. Ultimately, the weight of Tesfia's situation was added onto the scales, and sealed the deal.

"Fine, I guess I'll do it."

Lamentable as it might be, Alus decided to do just as Berwick had hoped.

After that, Loki told Alus what she knew about the tournament.

That said, he wasn't sure where to start. For the time being, he rearranged the training schedule in his mind.

He and Loki shouldn't have any particular problems, so the practice was primarily for Tesfia and Alice. The mana control exercises using the training

sticks was something that was pointless unless they kept it up, so they would simply have to do that on their own back at the dorm.

As for shifting the training at the laboratory to a tournament-oriented schedule, Alus concluded that something closer to actual combat would be the most effective.

The next day, he asked the two girls, who were at the laboratory for their instruction, "You two would prefer doing more tournament-oriented training, wouldn't you?"

"Of course! We are representing the Institute after all," Tesfia answered him full-force. For her, it wasn't so much a matter of nobility as that her whole future depended on it.

"I think that would be better, too. I can't properly use Shiylereis in real battles yet... oh, but it's not like I hate the training we're doing right now, okay?!" Alice finished in a fluster, waving her hands in front of her.

"Of course you don't. But well, we'll change the training to a more tournament-oriented one, so you'll have to keep up your mana control practice on your own."

"Okay."

"Got it! But will that really make us stronger all of a sudden?" Tesfia's doubts were only natural, as changing up the training before gaining any results could be a recipe for failure.

"I've already thought about that. But if you don't trust me, you can just not do it. I'm sure your mother would be able to see through you if you haven't improved at all. So if you want to show off such a sorrowful sight, then go ahead."

"I-I'll do it, okay?!"

*Oh! I think I'll be able to use this again. Alus grinned in his mind.*

*Tesfia really is weak against her mother.* And if that was enough to motivate her, he was surprised by how easy she was to handle.

"We'll continue today as usual, and change the menu from tomorrow."

After saying that, Alus headed for his desk. Activating the virtual keyboard, he opened up a certain set of analysis data.

It was the results of the analysis of the mysterious ingot he'd bought from Budna in Folen. Just looking over it again was enough to make him want to dive back into his research.

The information scrolled past at high speed, as he took several minutes to repeatedly check it. These were the detailed results after using all of the equipment available to him in his laboratory. If he couldn't find anything here, the results would be the same wherever he took them. It'd be a complete mystery. That was just how cutting edge the equipment he had was.

The equipment measured the ingot's reaction to mana, scrupulously examining what kind of properties and effects it had.

Suddenly, Alus suppressed his exhilaration while pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Is something the matter, Sir Alus?" Loki worriedly asked, without missing a beat.

"You could say that."

With a perplexed expression, she looked at Alus as if to ask permission to inquire about it.

He didn't really have a reason to refuse, and it was a good time for a break. However, it was only natural that he'd call Loki closer and speak in a lower voice, considering the value of the ingot.

"This is what you bought from the craftsman you are familiar with, is it not? It's beautiful, but it's not gold, is it?" Loki wouldn't understand by looking at the information on display, so she instead asked Alus directly.

"Of course. And judging from the data, this is probably what you'd call meteor metal."

"—! So it really exists."

"Well, I have the real thing too. You probably don't know, but my AWR was made using meteor metal."

"I see... but this is the first time I've seen the real thing like this. It must be worth a lot."

"At the very least, it's not something you could ever afford as an individual. Of course, most people wouldn't even consider trying to get their hands on this."

"Why not? If you sold it, wouldn't you be able to live comfortably for the rest of your life?"

"It wouldn't be just you, but even your grandchildren, I'll bet. But the problem is that it's so expensive. Even if you tried to sell it, only a nation could buy it. But if you don't have clearly stated ownership of it, there'd definitely be a struggle for it. Nations can't be trusted either, after all. At any rate, it is definitely worth enough to make most people dizzy just thinking about it."

"So what will you do?"

"Nothing good will come from an individual hanging on to it indefinitely. Meteor metals and other special materials for AWRs are very delicate when they're in their unprocessed state. And with its properties being unknown, I'd like to avoid running it through the machines over and over again. Instead..."

A common trait between all materials that made for good AWRs was that mana information had an easy time settling into them. If used for over a month, that almost certainly would be the case.

When it came to weapon-shaped AWRs, it was common to use a different material as its core. The parts that required magical materials would be the weapon's edge or blade.

Moreover, those materials would deteriorate considerably if any repurposing was attempted once the AWR's mana information had settled in.

As such, using the materials for a new AWR would result in something with a much worse performance.

"We should probably make an AWR with this right away."

The moment Loki heard that, her eyes sparkled in anticipation.

Alus didn't particularly have a problem with that either... but meteor metals were special. Because the term didn't refer to a specific material, the properties were extremely varied, and there were things for which they were—and were not—suited.

"Sorry, but this doesn't have any affinity toward your lightning attribute. It would only have the opposite effect when made into an AWR."

"I-I see..." Loki visibly deflated.

"Well, better materials is not the only factor for this kind of thing. As long as you use an AWR suited for your attribute made from decent materials, it's not going to be any inferior to high-grade materials."

Alus wasn't trying to comfort her. He was simply stating the truth. Thinking that you could become a Double or Single just by using an AWR made from meteor metal was far too simplistic. If someone were to say that, they'd be admitting to their own incompetence as a Magicmaster.

AWRs were made to efficiently assist with magic. Nothing more should be expected from them. Using an AWR that exceeded your abilities would only ruin your own skills.

"I just thought of something," Alus said with a smile, after checking through the data one more time.

This metal had the property of generating a weak, low frequency electromagnetic wave.

There was a mineral with a similar property known as magnelite, and when put close to a similar material they would create a weak magnetic field between them.

Interestingly enough, this metal had an even stronger tendency for that, resonating and making the frequency fluctuate. An example of an application of this frequency fluctuation was the Consensors that Magicmasters used. In other words, it would be easy to create magical interference using this material.

There were all kinds of AWRs that could be designed using this.

Ideas were popping up one after another in Alus' mind, and he picked out the most optimal one of them.

Loki's existence had already disappeared from his field of view. Despite that, she wasn't unhappy about it. If anything, after seeing him devoting himself to thinking up a prototype AWR, she happily walked away to focus on her own training, being careful not to make any sounds.

\* \* \*

That night, Alus returned to Budna in Folen with the ingot.

While he'd come up with an image for the prototype AWR, he still wanted to hear the opinion of an expert.

Hearing that his mysterious ingot was meteor metal made Budna let out a sigh of relief. He didn't find it particularly regrettable. "I don't want to be caught up in no trouble and get killed," he said, which Alus could perfectly understand.

If Budna could completely hide that he had meteor metal in his possession that would be one thing, but information had a tendency to get leaked. Alus could defend himself, but as a regular citizen Budna couldn't. That's why Alus had taken extra care in this matter.

For now, Alus showed Budna the analysis data that showed the material's composition and characteristics, as well as his plan for the AWR.

"Can you finish it up in a month?"

"Aye, but aren't you being a little too pushy for this old man?"

"And?"

"Well, it should be easier than your own job, but are you sure about taking it in this direction?"

"Yeah, it'll definitely become a unique AWR. Are you unhappy about that, gramps?"

"Hmph... what a crass brat," Budna said, but unrestrained exhilaration showed on his face.

Budna was sick of making AWRs according to a template. He felt it was a waste of what precious time he had left in his life. Frankly, he couldn't feel any motivation doing work someone else could do. He felt that the only thing worth his time was working on something that only he could do.

Despite it being late at night, Budna let out a hearty laugh... though it soon turned into a coughing fit. "There be no way that I can't do it! Though I would have rejected it completely, thinking it impossible if you weren't the one that proposed it. Well, it seems like an armchair theory, but you're confident in it, aren't you?"

"Of course."

There was nothing more to discuss. Alus was convinced that it would work, or he wouldn't have shown up. Adding Budna's skills to his idea, they would make the impossible possible.

"And just so you know, this is the formula I want engraved," Alus said, bringing up another paper with a magic formula on it. Though it would be Alus' job to engrave it, he simply wanted to make sure that Budna left enough space for him to do so.

Seeing that, Budna scratched his chin and raised his voice. "I haven't seen this formula before." His eyes lit up like a predator spotting its prey, just like a true craftsman.

Normally, engraving formulas was included in the craftsman's job. However, engraving a difficult magic formula required more than just superficial understanding. It required understanding of its entire meaning and structure.

And engraving on a straight and flat surface was one thing, but engraving on something like a curved blade required minute adjustments of

the angle and spacing of the symbols. If not, the formula would fail or cause an accident.

In short, the formulas Budna could engrave were the ones that were known and widespread in their use. Which was why Alus was the only one who could engrave this formula that Budna had never seen before. That was why they were splitting up the job.

"It's a light attribute formula. I'll be messing around with it too, so this is just the basic construct."

Hearing that, Budna let out a voice of wonder, with an almost youthful-looking smile. He could feel a swirling in his chest. It was his spirit as a craftsman being stimulated.

"Interesting. Right, one month, is it?"

"Yeah, it can be a little delayed as long as it's around one month."

"Don't be stupid. If you give me a deadline of one month, then it be my job to make it on time!"

Alus was impressed. That was the spirit of a true craftsman for you.

"Naw, it be no problem. If this metal is like your data says, then it won't take much time."

"Got it. Contact me the same way as usual."

"I know that."

"What about the payment?"

"Once it's done. I don't need anything up front."

"Right," Alus said, and with that he'd made his request.

As he headed for the shop exit, he heard footsteps following behind him. Finding it hard to believe that old Budna would see him off, he turned around.

Having apparently read Alus like a book, the old man snorted and said, "The shop will have to keep closed for a while. Nothing good can come from having any of them rumors spread."

*Ah, right.* The sound of clanging metal would likely be heard coming from Budna's shop from here on.

After watching the shutters close, Alus looked around him... and, not picking up on any suspicious presences, he blended into the dark of night.

Nobody was any the wiser that the rarest of materials—meteor metal—had been brought into the city, and that another unrivaled AWR would be created at the hands of a master craftsman and the greatest Magicmaster.



## Twenty-First Chapter

### Rulers Conference

*That should just about do it for training during the vacation,* Alus nodded to himself in his laboratory. He'd reserved the training grounds for a whole month for Tesfia's and Alice's sake.

Since Loki, Alice and Tesfia had already been picked for the upcoming tournament, they were given priority to use a corner of the grounds. If there was any opposition, that would have to be worked out, but there'd likely be none.

That was because the students who weren't chosen for the tournament would benefit from the Second Magical Institute winning as well. It was an unwritten rule that the winning nation would establish new units that would show preferential treatment to the graduates of the institutes that contributed to a tournament win.

Moreover, another benefit for the students was that the restriction would be lifted on accepting provisional duties.

Provisional duties were commissioned by the Institute for second-year and third-year students. They were essentially interns with the military, but they also received payment, so it was a chance to earn some money.

Through this system, students were able to accept requests around the nation, though most were centered on maintaining public order.

They resolved complaints lodged against the security forces, patrolled cities, cleaned buildings, and the like. In short, it was like a part-time job. The use of magic was, of course, permitted as well.

While they were military-related duties, they were all simple in nature. When restrictions were lifted, they were allowed to take on more difficult missions.

Since that also included assisting on the defensive lines, it was the perfect opportunity for the upperclassmen to get the higher-ups to remember their faces. Because of that, almost nobody would complain about the three girls reserving part of the training grounds. In a sense, the whole Institute came together on this.

Having successfully made the arrangements, Alus immediately moved on to give the three their training instructions. In essence, it was live combat training centered around Loki. At the training grounds, there was no need to worry about injuries either.

In order to make her able to freely use her Icicle Sword, the task Alus gave to Tesfia was to enchant her katana with the spell, from manifestation to sculpting.

To Alus, Icicle Sword was all flash and no substance. While it was powerful, it was useless in battle against another person if all she could do was shoot it out.

As for why she was being made to improve on Icicle Sword, that was because it was simply too unusable for a spell passed down in the Fable family.

Moreover, after analyzing its properties and composition, Alus concluded that it had the potential to evolve much further. Frankly, being able to use it in a free manner was more important in actual combat than just being able to shoot it out. More specifically, it would be a lot more useful if Tesfia could easily control the sword of ice as it floated in the air.

Additionally, there was no need to make it so stupidly large. She'd be able to adapt better if she could make several swords of normal size instead.

Of course, Alus would not accept something as unrefined as firing it off immediately after creating it.

Regardless, this was something that had to be walked through in small steps. Even this step would probably be rather difficult for Tesfia, but nothing would start if she didn't give it a shot.

As for Alice, she would be sparring with Loki while trying to incorporate Shiylereis into her tactics. It was a task to improve her strength when it came to martial arts. The only way to train the ability to smoothly cast a spell was through experience.

She was also given the task of grasping and maintaining a set of spatial coordinates through attribute-less magic. That was the process of stopping the materialization of a spell halfway through and activating it at another location.

When Alus first explained it to her, Alice could only look at him with confusion as her mind blanked out. But if you were to ask Alus, it was among the easier things to do. He'd given her a fair degree of hints, and she'd have to learn the rest by feel. In terms of technique, however, it was pretty basic.

Considering the spells Alice had used so far, she'd likely never had to use that kind of strategic construction. The way to judge whether she was successful at it would be to put a device that reacts to mana some distance away from Alice and see if it could detect her mana.

Finally, as for Loki, Alus had hesitated over what task to give her.

At first, he'd considered having her learn Force, the lightning-attribute body-enhancement spell. It was a spell where the user wore an electric current, raising their reaction speed and forcibly improving their physical abilities.

Though it put a lot of strain on the body, and the user's sensitivity to pain was dulled, it wasn't unheard of for someone to recklessly push themselves past their limits and not even notice how beaten up they were. Considering Loki's personality, Alus seriously had to think about it.

Force was a spell that everyone who could use the lightning attribute had heard of at least once, but it was a double-edged sword. That was why Alus left the decision of learning Force or not up to Loki.

That said, it wasn't a spell just anyone with the lightning affinity could use. It required delicate technique in converting mana. Since Loki could use detection magic, she should be able to handle it.

That was the general schedule for the summer vacation, but once it was determined, Alus himself was nowhere to be seen.

Where was he, and what was he doing?

For that, we'll have to go back in time several days...

Alus was putting work into the creation of the AWR well into the night, making adjustments to the formula that would be engraved. At the same time, he was also looking to create new spells.

Loki couldn't help but let out yet another yawn for the night, and when Alus glanced her way, he decided it was about time to wrap it up.

Suddenly, a knock echoed out, signaling the arrival of a guest.

It was problematic considering the time. However, the knock didn't come from the door, but rather the window behind Alus, so this was more than just problematic.

Loki immediately prepared for battle, and by instinct she reached down towards her waist. But having changed into her sleepwear, she wasn't equipped with her knife AWRs.

Alus raised a hand to stop her, and said "Come in" in a serious tone. He'd seen her enter the grounds, and expected that she would come here.

"Please excuse my late intrusion, Sir Alus," she said, as she entered. It was a young woman wearing a maid outfit.

Her brown hair was rolled up in a simple fashion, exposing her white nape. Her forelocks stretched down all the way to her chest and hung over her ample bosom. She was the very model image of a maid, and not just by looks alone either. Her atmosphere and gentle attitude was all suitably appropriate for a servant. As long as you disregarded the fact that she'd entered through the window, that is.





"It's been a while, Ms. Rinne."

"Yes. A year, I believe."

"—!! Could you be that Rinne Kimmel?!"

"... Yes."

Loki had raised her voice in surprise, and the young woman answered her with a smile.

It was no wonder Loki had heard of her. She was a renowned user of detection magic, and with her Spotter rank at No. 2, she was called Alpha's Eye.

Her demeanor exuded elegance, but her expression was unmoving. She had an almost doll-like atmosphere similar to Loki. Her gentle eyes and facial features gave her a composed and graceful look.

But what stood out most was the ever-present smile on her face. Depending on the situation, it almost looked sarcastic. And since her expression didn't give any hints, it was impossible to know what she was thinking.

Rinne herself had a mild personality, but she certainly wasn't emotionless. Her current atmosphere stemmed from an experience in the past. However, as a modest maid, she almost never spoke of it. It was something like an occupational disease for Rinne, who served as both a bodyguard and maid for a certain person.

"Is this about that thing again?" Alus quietly asked.

"Yes. Can you please accompany me this time? Lady Lettie is on a mission, so I have been told that I have to bring you with me, Sir Alus."

Lady Lettie, of course, referred to Lettie Kultunca, the No. 7th-ranked Magicmaster. Alus figured that her mission must have dragged on for longer than expected, which was why Rinne was here so late at night.

"Well, I might end up participating in the tournament as well, so I was going to accompany you anyway this time if I was called for it."

"That is good to hear." Rinne held her slim hands in front of her chest, as her expression changed for the first time since coming here.

Her face blossomed with a big smile. "Then, let us go right away," she said, taking his hand.

"Eh... Eh?!" Loki let out an astonished voice.

Figuring that he'd need to explain things, Alus said, "Can you wait a minute, Ms. Rinne? I have to make some preparations."

"Of course. To think I got a little carried away, how embarrassing. After all, this is the first time you've ever accepted. And I wasn't sure what would happen when I heard that Lady Lettie couldn't make it."

Alice might mischievously stick out her tongue at this point, but it was hard to imagine this maid behaving like that.

That said, while she might be a servant, she showed glimpses of the kind of adorableness that calmed people down.

"So I'm leaving the rest to you, Loki."

“Do you think I will accept that?!”

Hearing the answer he expected, Alus exchanged looks with Rinne, who nodded back to him. It appeared that they still had a little leeway.

“Every year, before the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament, the rulers of each nation gather at a conference where all kinds of things are officially decided. And the rules are that the rulers may only bring one person to accompany them. The norm is to bring the nation’s highest-ranking Magicmaster, but I’ve refused every year and pushed that onto Lettie. But this time I might end up participating too, and Lettie’s out on a mission, so I have no choice but to go.”

Because it happened every year, Alus and Rinne were acquainted. The person accompanying the ruler was in essence treated as a guard of honor, but really, they were just a decoration. Single Digit Magicmasters accompanying the ruler were a form of demonstration of that nation’s power.

“By ruler... you mean Lady Cicelnia?”

“That’s right.”

The use of the term ‘ruler’ was the same in all the nations. ‘Ruler’ was used by the nations to replace the words that originally specified someone as being the highest level of royal or imperial lineage, as the number of nations of the world shrunk to a mere seven.

As the current ruler, Cicelnia stood at the top of the nation. There were high hopes for her in the future, and she’d made her public debut quite some time ago.

The commonly used name of Princess Cicelnia il Arlzeit, as well as her outstanding beauty, were known to all Alpha citizens.

Officially, she was the 15th Queen. While she was Queen, her circumstances were somewhat peculiar. That was because the Governor-General was the highest authority in matters concerning the military and security.

That meant that the ruler was at the top as far as the nation’s government, but she didn’t have much say in the military’s actions, or about the Outer World where humanity’s greatest threat rampaged around. The regular citizens aside, Magicmasters weren’t overly familiar with her.

That said, when it came to matters of ceremony between the nations, the ruler held the right to decide, so there was no doubt that she was the highest authority when it came to internal affairs and diplomacy. Furthermore, the details of international events were typically decided at the rulers conferences.

Incidentally, Cicelnia also enjoyed an overwhelmingly high amount of support from the citizens. She was an idol of sorts, but Alus recognized her as someone sharp and able, not just a figurehead.

Since the ruler also had the authority to appoint the Governor-General, it was rumored that Berwick’s appointment was the result of Cicelnia’s machinations.

However, Alus hadn't directly confirmed that with Berwick, nor had he found any decisive evidence that Cicelnia had done anything, so it was a very feeble rumor. He wouldn't go so far as to say that it was a rumor that had spiraled out of control, but that probably wasn't far off.

In reality, the ruler's authority didn't stretch so far as the ability to give the Governor-General orders. The best the ruler could hope for was to gain an understanding of military information and the state of affairs through the Governor-General's reports.

But the ruler of Alpha traditionally kept a personal elite force under their command.

According to the rumors, they were all experts in anti-personnel combat to protect the ruler from external enemies, but in this modern age when magic prospered, Magicmasters could comfortably fulfill that role.

The elite force did little with Magicmasters able to guard the ruler, so it was more of an obsolete custom, which was why the elite force that served under Cicelnia was just for show, with only one person actually serving as her bodyguard and close aide.

That was none other than Rinne Kimmel.

"There you have it. So look after those two while I'm gone for a couple of days. Just follow the training menu."

"Then please take me with you."

Seeing Alus' troubled look, Rinne gave him a helping hand. In a soft voice, she called out to Loki as if admonishing a selfish child. "I'm sorry, Ms. Loki. The conference location is a secret."

"I-I see."

*Loki's shoulders dropped. Again... I'm being left behind again.*

It couldn't be helped, and Alus felt a painful reluctance in leaving Loki here. "Loki, your detection radius is still not able to cover the 2 kilometer range needed for it to be useful. Once you can do that, I wouldn't mind bringing you with me anywhere, but you can't come this time."

"I understand..."

Alus scratched his head at the weak response that was so different from what he was used to.

Behind him, Rinne raised her eyebrows, but nobody noticed. *Anywhere, is it? Well, as far as Sir Alus is concerned, national secrets don't seem to matter*, she thought to herself, feeling a chill run down her spine.

"Right, then why don't I take you with me the next time I head over to Folen?"

"Really?!"

Alus couldn't help but think that Loki looked like a puppy wagging its tail when she so suddenly cheered up. Seeing her sparkling eyes, he couldn't bring himself to question if something like that was fine with her. He was sure that she would've wanted to meet the head of state. *I don't get it.*



At any rate, he'd made it up to Loki. With that, he was free to catch his breath and get to his preparations, when he realized that he didn't have any clothes suitable for a guard of honor. He did have his military uniform, but that felt a little too strict. And what was that about carrying weapons again?

"Ms. Rinne, there was no point in bringing an AWR, was there?"

"That's correct. Weapons are to be left outside of the meeting place."

"Then I won't need it." In the end, his preparations amounted to changing out of his casual, around-the-house clothing into outerwear.

"Sir Alus, when will you be back?" Loki asked.

"I'm not sure, this is my first time going."

"It's only expected to take a day. Even if discussions take longer, I believe it would only be two, three days at most."

"You heard her."

Loki elegantly bowed in understanding to Alus in a fashion that matched Rinne's own, and she was a little proud of that.

With that, Alus and Rinne were finally off. Unusually enough, they left through the window. Since the glass had been broken in the previous attack, it had been modified so that it could be opened in case something happened again.

That said, it wasn't exactly meant to be used as a normal exit, and Alus couldn't help but smile wryly. *I guess I'm not one to talk.*

Once they were outside the Institute grounds, Alus asked Rinne, who was ahead of him, "The venue is the same place it is every year, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is in a certain building in the vicinity of Babel."

"So how are we getting there?" It was quite some distance to Babel from here. Moreover, if they headed there directly they'd run across a lake on the way. Normally the transfer gate just before the lake was used to travel beyond it.

"I haven't really decided, but would it not be faster to run there?" Rinne answered in a calm voice without even turning around.

"Don't you think your treatment is too rough around the edges?"

He couldn't see her expression from behind her, but he received a slightly panicked answer.

"T-That's not true! It's just that Lady Lettie is a very lively person, so that is what she does every time. Normally, we would bring out a magic car, but... it slipped my mind."

"Well, it's all right."

"We will head for the transfer gate, but we won't go directly to the venue from there. We'll input the secret coordinates before transporting."

"I see. So that's why you've been making sure that we're not being followed, right?" As they cut through the wind, Alus could feel he was being watched by someone. But he didn't feel any hostility or bloodlust in their stare, so it wasn't hard for him to guess at the truth.

"That's right. But I didn't think you would notice the Eye of Providence."

"It was just a coincidence," Alus said—but in reality, he was surprised and very interested.

The Eye of Providence was something he knew of by name. But it was less magic and more of a special ability. It was a power you were born with, a type of Magic Eye. According to some books, it gave its wielder an extensive field of view covering a vast range.

In other words, Rinne was seeing the scenery around her through thousands of eyes in her mind.

If the information in the book Alus had read was to be believed, Rinne should be able to see for several kilometers without any gaps. Knowing that, almost nobody could escape her detection.

People with Magic Eyes were rare, and there were only two other people in recorded history who'd had the Eye of Providence.

As they were on their way to a secret location, there was no one more reliable to have on your side.

But just because you had a special ability didn't mean that you could make use of it. There was also the well-known fact that Magic Eye users risked having their sense of self collapse if they slipped up.

Controlling the Magic Eye when it first manifested was a difficult task, since the ability would be constantly activated at its maximum potential. At times it could warp the user's perception of reality or have a negative influence on their brain, leading to the user losing their mind.

As Alus thought of this, he tried to restrain his curiosity and urge to research it in more depth. *I guess that wouldn't work with her.*

Even Alus could see the consequences of his actions if he were to use the ruler's aide for research. Yet he couldn't take his mind off of it. After all, it was something similar to his own special ability.

He researched a lot of topics in parallel, but there was one in particular that he was stuck on without any progress—but now he could see a glimpse of a breakthrough.

"Could you let me see your eye while it's in use?"

"... Ah, of course... If you wish," Rinne answered, with a degree of hesitation.

Man fearing the unknown was something that never changed.

There were stories of victims of Magic Eye users when it ran out of control, so the public tended to reject those who wielded them.

Also, there were people who spouted baseless rumors that it was because their blood was mixed in with Fiends' blood. As such, those with special abilities rarely had happy childhoods.

Fortunately, the Eye of Providence didn't do any actual damage. But that still didn't change the fact that it was an abnormal sense, and there were those who had crushed their own eye because of the suffering they went through.

Rinne stopped running, and Alus felt guilty that he was delaying them out of his own personal interest. He hurried to stand in front of her,

knowing that she was also showing him her eye because she knew he was a researcher.

"..." Alus took a close look at Rinne's eye. A pale blue light was coming out from around her pupil. A strange magic formula also floated on top of her eyeball. "I've never seen a formula like this before. I wonder what its construction is..."

"... Uhm, Sir Alus?"

Rinne's somewhat embarrassed voice brought Alus back to his senses. He moved his face away from hers and apologized.

*I've heard that when it first manifests, it expends mana automatically.* Unlike Rinne, there was no embarrassment in Alus' expression as he thought about that. His spirit of inquiry as a researcher came first and foremost.

For the time being, Alus thought about the details of the knowledge he'd gleaned from observing her eye. "Thank you very much. Shall we keep going?"

With that, the two started running again, moving through the wind.

In the end, Alus couldn't gather his thoughts until they arrived at the transfer gate. It had been a process of coming up with theories and rejecting them, without reaching any conclusions. Ultimately, he didn't have enough clues.

At the moment, thinking about it any further would just be running in circles, so he pushed his investigation into the Magic Eye to the back of his mind.

In front of a large transfer gate, Rinne held her hand over the attached panel. It indicated that it was loading, and then that the process was complete. Their surroundings warped, and morphed as if everything around them was being rebuilt.

When the changeover was complete, the two had the lake at their backs as they stood on top of a hill in an area full of hills.

In front of them stood the grand, white Tower of Babel.

Even the smallest part of it was several hundred meters in diameter. And the largest part was almost five kilometers.

At first, it had been a smaller structure; but it had been reinforced and made thicker to serve as the barrier that fended off the Fiends.

"This way please, Sir Alus."

Turning in the direction of her voice, Alus saw Rinne standing by a carriage that was waiting for them.

The coachman was already present, and deeply bowed to Alus. He appeared to be well into his years, but didn't look like a Magicmaster. However, the way he carried himself made it seem like he was no normal coachman.

"This is one of the caretakers of the facility where the conference is held."

The carriage had two horses pulling it. It was a very quaint sight in this day and age when magic cars existed, but this was a ceremonial custom for the rulers conference.

After that, they spent some time inside the shaking carriage.

Along the road were magic lamps, evenly spaced, that lit the road even in the darkness. Moreover, there didn't appear to be any forested areas for as far as the eye could see.

Instead, they were driving along the outer circumference of Babel, through a monotonous grassy plain.

The giant circular wall enclosing Babel had seven lines extending out from the tower to mark the borders of the seven nations. It was easy to picture it as a cake cut into seven pieces with a candle sticking up in the middle.

Next to the outer wall of Babel, you could easily traverse through several nations after a few minutes of carriage travel.

However, the nations had come to an agreement that the area directly surrounding Babel was neutral territory that didn't belong to any one nation.

Finally, the carriage slowed down, and Alus could see the venue for the rulers conference for the first time.

It was an old fortress that had a very refined atmosphere. Its scale looked diminished because of Babel being in the background, but the fortress could easily accommodate 300 people and had over 50 rooms.

The castle walls had been raised in ancient times when humans warred against one another, and it was quite clearly not a fortress made with fighting Fiends in mind.

It was the same white color as the Tower of Babel, with three spires soaring up into the air. From here, it looked like a trident threatening to pierce the skies. According to Rinne, the rulers conference was held on the top floor.

In the end, they arrived just as the sun was starting to rise in the distance.

It appeared their journey had taken much longer than expected, and Alus thought what a pain all this was, as he held his hand up to cover the sun on the horizon, squinting.

He decided to rest in the room he was guided to by a staff member. Considering when he'd left the Institute, he wanted to take a nap for the few hours remaining before the conference began.

Alus woke up around nine, so he'd gotten around four or five hours of sleep.

The reason he awoke was because the fortress had suddenly gotten busy. Perhaps because they'd woken up early, the rulers decided that they might as well hold the conference earlier.

Finishing his preparations, Alus pulled a black suit from the closet. With him being assigned as a guard of honor, he wasn't expected to adhere to formal attire.

Alus in particular had inherited the Governor-General's dislike of pompous outfits. It was an accommodation granted to him for being at the top of all Magicmasters.

He put on a white shirt, and then the suit jacket. It felt stiff, so he pulled at the collar to loosen it a little.

*It's like I'm a butler*, he thought to himself, as he undid the top button of the shirt.

Rinne had told him the program ahead of time in the carriage. As long as there weren't any objections to the content, the rulers would stamp their individual seals and the opening of the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament would be officially accepted.

Alus felt it was a waste of time, but he acknowledged that this was important too, as long as he himself wasn't involved.

As the rulers rarely gathered if not for situations like this, the conference was also an opportunity for humanity to reaffirm that they were working together to fight against their common enemy.

However—that was just on the surface. From what Alus heard from Rinne, it was really a place for politics, and they were constantly evaluating one another.

Incidentally, once Rinne had guided Alus to the castle, she turned back around, being required to return to Alpha's ruler, Cicelnia.

Once Alus stepped out of his room, his eyes met with one of the servants.

"Good morning, Sir Alus."

His name was known. There must be a list of guests, as expected of an important conference.

"Good morning. Are you guys serving breakfast?"

"But of course," the servant said, and began to walk, guiding Alus to the dining room.

Alus was currently in a nook of the third floor of the fortress. They moved past several rooms in the hallway until they reached the big staircase, going down one floor and past the double doors to their right, until they reached their destination.

Entering through the doors, Alus scanned his surroundings. The room could probably fit around a hundred people. There were still plenty of empty seats, but it appeared that the kitchen at the opposite end of the room was hard at work, as the delicious smell of food wafted through the air.

That said, at a closer look, the dining room wasn't completely empty. A single person sat in the middle of the room, eating all by their lonesome.

Alus glanced at the young man. Around him were large tables with chairs around them. Thinking of how wearisome it would be to eat dinner around here, Alus followed after the servant guiding him.

And when the servant pulled back a chair for Alus to sit behind the young man... Alus unexpectedly noticed that the young man's back reminded him of an acquaintance of his.

"... Is that you, Jean?"

When he asked this, the young man put the spoon with soup in it he was about to eat back into his bowl.

The soup had a translucent golden color, with an appetizing smell arising as its surface was disturbed. There was also a large basket with assorted breads from which steam was rising, revealing they were freshly baked. The smell of butter dominated the table, and from an onlooker's perspective it looked like Alus had been drawn in by the aromas of the food.

And then the young man called Jean slowly turned around, a cheerful smile on his face. "How unusual to see you here, Alus."

He had blond hair in a casual style, a medium build, and appeared to be in his mid-teens. His full name was Jean Rumbulls. This was the rank No. 3 Magicmaster from the neighboring country of Rusalca.

At first glance, anyone would assume he was a cheerful and openhearted young man with a good nature. Aside from Lettie, he was the only other Single Digit that Alus was acquainted with.

He and Jean had been sent out once on a joint operation, and had known each other since then. Alus didn't really consider the two of them to be friends, but Jean had a strangely affable side to him. He was the sociable type, even speaking to Alus who was difficult to approach.

Jean was a bit older, but he talked to Alus like they were friends of the same age, and even among the quirky Singles he had a friendly, almost childishly innocent atmosphere to him.

Alus didn't particularly hate the guy. If anything, he didn't mind the cheerful and frank side of him that let him casually call out to even surly Alus himself.

Likewise, he didn't hate Lettie Kultunca, Alpha's other Single Digit Magicmaster, who had a similar atmosphere to her. But in her case, she acted like an older sister, always messing with him, which he found a little irritating.

As Alus thought about that, Jean asked him, "Where's Ms. Lettie?"

"She's on a mission. It concerns a strategic point for the Vanalis recovery plan, so the top brass probably didn't want to let her go."

"Hmm, I see."

Alus then told the servant, who'd been waiting for him to finish speaking to Jean, that he'd be sitting with him. To which the servant pulled back a chair at the table with a smile. Alus also ordered the same food that Jean ordered.

"I hear that Rusalca will be sending in a force to that area soon, too. Once it's recovered, there will probably be another joint operation to lay the groundwork," Jean noted.

If Rusalca and Alpha were to carry out the recovery plan together, the Fiends there wouldn't be a problem for long.

The real issue was the stakes the two nations would have in it. There would be no shortage of disputes that could occur over who would get the territorial rights to what area.

"Then they should have done so from the start," Alus said bluntly.

Jean showed a somewhat fed-up expression himself, letting out a heavy sigh. "Our military would be smarter if they could be up front like that..."

In neither nation was the situation fully under control. In that regard, Berwick was skillfully keeping things organized in Alpha.

"But it's still unusual to see you here. Even if Ms. Lettie is on a mission, they could have just sent a Double."

"That would have worked too, but I'll be participating this time."

"Huh? Participating in what?"

"The Friendship Magical Tournament. I'm a student right now."

"*Seriously?*"

"Seriously."

Jean let out a roar of laughter. "That's got to be cheating," he said, slapping his forehead.

"Well, I wouldn't care if I didn't have to participate either. But the top brass have their own circumstances and won't let it happen. Besides, didn't you participate when you were a student too?"

"No, well... wait, I did."

It was common for any excellent Magicmaster to have participated in the tournament when they were institute students, so Jean was at a loss for words. "But it's not like you have to participate this year..." he finally said.

Hearing that, Alus recalled something Berwick had said about Rusalca's Governor-General bragging that they had some promising students this time around. That piqued his interest a little, and he decided to ask Jean about it.

"You have some people who are competent this year?"

"You could say that. They're Triples by rank alone, but they should be able to get on in the Outer World just fine."

"That's impressive."

"You don't think that at all, do you?"

Alus had thrown out some empty praise, but Jean easily saw through it. If anything, almost any words the current rank No. 1 might say might come off as sarcastic. "Of course. Someone from Rusalca isn't likely to be of any use to me, not even in a joint operation."

"You're the same as always," Jean laughed, without any concern. He continued, with a smile that had no hostility behind it, "However, we will still win this year. You can try as hard as you like, but in the end this is a tournament and you're only one person."

"We'll see about that. I've got a reward on the line."

"Wha—?! You've been bought off?"

"This is just another mission," Alus said with a composed expression. To him, the tournament was just another job.

Recalling how merciless and expressionless Alus looked during missions, Jean smiled wryly as he brought his hands together in front of his face. "Sheesh, can you at least take it easy on our Magicmasters?"

Jean was wary of the 'accidents' that happened every so often during the tournaments. As this was a live combat tournament, the occasional, rare tragedy was known to strike when the difference in ability between two participants was too big, or when a powerful spell hit a vital spot.

They were events when valuable potential was unfortunately snuffed out. And it was especially easy to imagine it happening with a mere student going up against the current rank No. 1.

"I know that. What do you take me for?"

"I'm relieved to hear it. Oh, but you don't have to hold back against the people from other nations," Jean said with a mischievous smile.

His statement could very well be seen as treasonous, attempting to disturb the unity between nations. Since Jean always had a cheerful atmosphere to him, Alus couldn't tell if he was joking or being serious.

"Anyways, joking aside..."

*Oh, so it was just a joke,* Alus nodded to himself. Well, he didn't particularly care what happened to the novice Magicmasters of other nations, but he had no reason to earn himself the grudges of those nations either.

Thinking about it, though Jean rarely showed it, he was a sincere and serious person inside. At the very least, he wasn't the type to say something so unscrupulous and mean it.

Suddenly Jean looked away, confirming there was nobody around to eavesdrop before moving closer to Alus. "Did you hear... about Balmes?" he whispered, cautious of any prying eyes.

Balmes was a well-known name. It was a mid-sized nation to the north of Alpha. However, Alus was currently a student, and he shook his head at Jean's question.

When he did so, Jean brought his face even closer. "It seems they're going to force a large-scale recovery operation. It'll be led by, uhm... what was their name? Balmes' Magicmaster."

"Gileada?" Alus suggested.

Jean was likely speaking of Balmes' only Single Digit Magicmaster. Alus had only seen their name written down, but it was supposed to be a woman named Gileada.

Hearing about the large-scale operation, Alus recalled what Budna had said about AWRs in Alpha, as well as materials from the Outer World flowing to other countries. Movements on the national level required a large amount of preparation. But Alus pushed that aside for now and focused on his discussion with Jean.

"No, Ms. Gileada is ranked at about 20 now," Jean said.



It was only natural that he wouldn't remember. Rank No. 9 was a turbulent rank that often changed hands. Moreover, the lower half of the Singles weren't all that much stronger than the top of the Doubles.

There were also rumors that Balmes' Magicmasters were forcibly lifted up to have a Magicmaster in the Singles, because of how many of them had been in the lower ranks of the Single Digits. No smoke without fire, as they say.

At any rate, the No. 9 rank was overwhelmingly often held by a Magicmaster from Balmes.

"Right! It's someone called Duncal now," Jean said.

"Hmm. And, what about them?"

"That large-scale operation will be led with Duncal at the front, and Balmes is mobilizing all of their Magicmasters. But rumor has it that they're still having a hard time."

Alus shrugged at what Jean had to tell him. "That's a common thing, isn't it? Isn't it just that their abilities don't live up to the rank of a Single?"

Jean agreed, as he lightly snorted. "I bet. But even then, they've at least got to have the abilities of a Double."

Even if they were being forcibly put into the rank of the Singles, they should have considerable abilities. If Balmes were to push someone trivial into the honored seat of a Single Digit for the sake of the nation's ego, they would only lose face eventually.

Alus shrugged again, and said with a sarcastic smile, "If the people from Balmes are here today, why don't we ask them? Though they probably wouldn't tell."

"True." Jean was more informed on the international situation than Alus was. That was a clear difference between Alus and the other Magicmasters.

Alus honestly believed that he'd be fine on his own regardless of what happened to humanity. That's why he didn't bother with interfering with other nations' business, but the other Magicmasters were different.

As with Jean, they had to fight for humanity's sake. They couldn't take the stance of not caring what happened to the other nations. That's why Jean was earnestly gathering information.

If even a single nation let Fiends past the barrier, Babel, the key to maintaining the human realm, would be threatened. If that happened, humanity would have nowhere to run.

But even under that kind of situation, nations couldn't abandon their selfish motives to work together. They couldn't trust other nations under a state of emergency. As such, they couldn't show any weakness, and many considered nations truly working together to be nothing but an empty ideal.

"Incidentally, Jean, I heard that magic book type AWRs are getting popular in Rusalca."

"Ah, those..." Jean's cheek twitched slightly. His own AWR was a unique weapon called Rage Balls, which consisted of multiple special small balls that made up a single AWR.

As such, it was Rusalca's other Single Digit Magicmaster who used a magic book AWR, a woman named Hispida Orfeen.

"Ms. Hispida is obsessed with money, after all," Jean said.

That's where things clicked for Alus. A Single's endorsement was perfect for a commercial brand. By turning the type of AWR a first-rate Magicmaster used into a brand, they'd be able to set a trend and their business would be booming.

Alus thought it was a good trick, but he didn't think she would be using it herself.

However, it was a double-edged sword that might end up harming the nation. Like Budna had said, magic book AWRs weren't something that just anyone could pick up and use. The nation could end up paying dearly for its Magicmasters falling for a trend and using these AWRs while ignoring the compatibility factor. He secretly sympathized with Jean's struggles.

After finishing breakfast, Alus and Jean left the dining room as they continued their small talk, though the topics brought up probably wouldn't be referred to as such by others, and settled down in a corner of the waiting room.

Alus enjoyed himself so much that he even forgot about the time, for the first time in a while. He still didn't care about the other nations, but by keeping up to date on the state of affairs he could avoid any potential sparks raining down on him.

Of course, he understood the importance of the information. While it was idle talk between two Single Digit Magicmasters, its contents exceeded the scope of what you'd hear in public, especially when it touched on the motives behind political movements.

They didn't stop their conversation until they saw the servants hurriedly moving outside.

"I guess it's about time," Jean said, looking at the elaborate crystal clock behind Alus.

"Isn't it a little early?"

"No, your ruler and my ruler are special." Jean tiredly shrugged his shoulders for some reason, and got up from his seat.

Alus followed suit. Jean had more experience with these conferences, so he figured it would be wise to follow Jean's lead since it was his first time here.

Alus and Jean leaned against the wall in front of the grand doors by the entrance hall, staring at the servants flying out of the doors.

Two carriages had just arrived. In the next moment, the servants lined up on each side of the entrance to welcome the guests.

At the same time, the carriages' doors opened, and two elegant figures stepped down onto the walkway that had been prepared for them.

One was a person Alus knew. This was probably the third time they'd met.

They'd met for the first time at an award ceremony, but had only spoken at the celebration afterward, and even then it was just a simple greeting. He remembered both of them feeling the other out at the time.

Alus' impression was that this person was different from other rulers that he found imbecilic. At the same time, he had categorized her as someone disagreeable.

That person was now elegantly walking with Rinne on her right, who held up a parasol for her.

Her name was Cicelnia il Arlzeit. She had turned 20 just the other day, and it had only been three years since she'd become the ruler.

Her bluish-black hair reached all the way down to her knees, and that, alongside her almost translucent skin, left a strong impression. She wore a pure white dress, her milky-white legs peeking out from the dress even more beautiful than her outfit.

Like all important state officials, she wore a thin veil covering her face; but once removed, it would surely reveal equally beautiful facial features.

At any rate, she gave off a graceful impression to anyone who saw her. Moreover, her breasts were sufficiently large enough to give her perfect proportions. Her almost mystical beauty that garnered massive support from the citizens was ever present today as well.

However, as for the words that escaped her beautiful lips... "Oh, what a nuisance. How depressing. Can I ask you to not parade such a vulgar smell around me, Ms. Lithia?" Cicelnia said to the equally elegant woman to her left.

Said woman gracefully replied in kind, "There is no need to be so envious, Ms. Cicelnia. Wearing a noble fragrance is only the minimum amount of care one should take in their appearance. Though, I can say I do understand your jealousy of the finest quality of herbs that can be gathered in Rusalca."

The woman who responded with such dripping sarcasm was Rusalca's ruler, Lithia Touff Infratta. She was the same age as Cicelnia.

Hearing this, Cicelnia furrowed her brows beneath her veil.

"If you like, I can even let you have a bottle. You don't enjoy such luxuries in Alpha, do you? Certainly not in such a nation that stinks of iron, where even its royal castle is covered in oil, right, Ms. Cicelnia?"

Lithia's curled and sparkling golden hair hung above her bountiful chest as if to decorate it. She was hiding her face behind a veil like Cicelnia, but beneath it she had unyielding sky-blue eyes and even facial features, which combined with her golden hair gave her an almost fantastical impression. As the ruler of Rusalca, with her alluring beauty she was known as the Fairy by her citizens. It was as if she'd come straight out of a fairy tale.

"Why would I want one? Such a thick smell that covers up your own natural musk is only proof that you have no confidence as a woman. That uncouth and obscene stink fits a promiscuous woman who's constantly in heat like you."

“...! Who are you calling a promiscuous woman?! Ms. Cicelnia, can you not be so jealous of me just because you are not so well endowed?”

Unlike Cicelnia’s tight dress, Rusalca’s ruler wore an extravagant dress decorated in lace. The only thing they had in common was the veil all important people wore.

Cicelnia’s eyebrows visibly twitched under the veil once more. “It is not that I am not endowed, it is simply that I am *slim*, Ms. Lithia. Perhaps the reason you are so lacking in vocabulary is that the inadequate Rusalcan food is all going to your vulgar chest instead of to your brain? I feel for you, not having anything other than those lumps of fat to show.”

The two continued to exchange sharp words for their entire walk up to the front doors.

Alus stared at the two rulers, dumbfounded. To think that it wasn’t just the Governors-General but even the rulers that were on such bad terms...

When Alus turned back to Jean, the blond young man was no longer at his side. Looking around, he saw Jean ahead of him, approaching the two rulers with slumped shoulders.

“My ladies, can you leave it at that? There are surrounding eyes to think about,” Jean implored, indicating the servants with a look.

But as expected of professionals, neither Rinne nor the servants had even the slightest change in expression, as if nothing had happened, though there were some who cast their eyes down.

Jean’s words were effective in keeping the peace, and seeing how the two rulers were momentarily at a loss for words, he used this opportunity to smooth things over. “It has been a while, Lady Cicelnia.”

“Indeed, Jean Rumbulls. I see you are as sincere today as always.”

“Jean, there is no need to lower your head to that crude woman.”

Cicelnia’s cheek twitched at Lithia’s sharp words.

Jean pretended not to notice, as he continued, “Lady Lithia, there is someone I wish to introduce to you.” He then turned to glance towards Alus, who was still leaning against the wall.

However, before Lithia could settle her eyes on Alus, Cicelnia forcibly sped up her walking speed, trying to maintain her elegant appearance as she ran up to him.

“You are finally here, Alus.”

“Hello... it has been a while, Lady Cicelnia.”

“I’ve already forgotten about that. More importantly, people have been talking behind my back because you never show up. Like how Alpha’s No. 1 never comes to the conference because he’s a fake that’s been propped up.” A sigh caused the veil to flutter.

“Then why not just let them talk?”

“I cannot let them look down on Alpha. It is necessary for these kinds of events, in order to keep certain *someones* from getting full of themselves and taking advantage of us.”

Her words seemed almost laced with venom. When standing next to each other like this, there was almost no difference in height between Alus and Cicelnia. She was rather tall for a woman.

Alus felt like Cicelnia's eyes were peering at him from behind her veil.

"Why do we not move further on inside, Alus?"

"—Wait a moment!" Lithia, walking next to Jean, raised her voice.

Hearing his ruler's irritated tone of voice, Jean swiftly stepped in between them and tried to peacefully mediate between the rulers. "Lady Cicelnia, I would like to introduce Alus to my nation's ruler. May I?" Jean said with a perfect smile.

"Jean Rumbulls... Is that something you need permission from me for?"

Perhaps because she'd already taken a few steps up the stairs, when Cicelnia turned around it was as if she was applying pressure to everyone as she looked down on them. She most definitely did not speak in a friendly tone.

Instead, she spoke out sarcastically as if to tell Lithia that she had no obligation to introduce the two.

"Then..."

"Oh please, make it quick."

Jean's smile remained ever present, despite Cicelnia's displeased voice.

Thinking that he should repay the favor for the information Jean had given him before, Alus stepped up to help. However, he couldn't do something as disrespectful as introducing himself from above Lithia.

At the same time, he felt that he needed to put the ruler in check.

But not Lithia—rather, his own ruler.

For better or worse, he couldn't get a read on Cicelnia. Even the exchange around Alus' introduction seemed to have a degree of calculation behind it.

She spoke as if Alus was her protégé, using his worth to exert her own authority over the two Rusalcons. From Alus' point of view, that was no way to build up a good relationship, even if she was a ruler. Forcing an appropriate distance would be necessary.

Alus first came down the steps to Lithia's level, and then he kneeled.

"—!!" Everyone reacted with shock.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Lithia Touff Infratta. My name is Alus Reigin."

"And it is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Alus. I am sorry for making the strongest Magicmaster kneel. Nobody here can force a Single to do so." Lithia had a somewhat troubled expression, but she still smiled and held her hand out.

Alus reached out with his hand, and took her hand in his own. He caught a glimpse of her face behind the veil, and found it surprisingly childlike. Then, whispering in a quiet voice, he said, "I'm aware you might find it uncomfortable, but I ask you to please overlook the rudeness from before on my behalf."

Lithia immediately understood that he was talking about Cicelnia. She glanced up towards Cicelnia who was still standing on the stairs, and replied in a composed voice, "Of course. I can overlook something that small for your sake." Her expression behind her veil was likely filled with superiority.

It was impossible to see what kind of expression Cicelnia had, but her body seemed frozen in place from the shock.

A Single kneeling to his own ruler was one thing, but to the ruler of another nation was something completely different. It was a sign of the highest respect, and it was especially astonishing for those who knew what kind of person Alus was.

In reality, Alus had kneeled to Cicelnia before during the two award ceremonies, but never since then. In fact, he'd stopped showing up for the ceremonies after the second one in a sign of disrespect.

"Alus, that's enough. Let us go," Cicelnia managed to squeeze out, but her expression remained hidden by the veil.

Alus lowered his head to Lithia one more time, and followed after Cicelnia.

This entire little act was Alus' own way of putting Cicelnia in check, so he wouldn't solely be a card for her to play in her game of politics. He also expected that having Lithia recognize the same thing would be helpful at some point.

Whether Lithia was aware of Alus' intention or not, she called out to his back, "Mr. Alus, you should come over to Rusalca some time. There are plenty of things there that do not exist in Alpha. I am sure you would like it."

"I understand. I will look forward to visiting sometime."

Meanwhile, Jean wordlessly shrugged at Alus' unexpected behavior.

While Cicelnia's expression couldn't be seen behind her veil, watching her attendant Rinne's expression, it was possible to guess what kind of feelings were whirling inside of her. Alus had no way of knowing, but Rinne had let out a frustrated tongue click, and had been grinding her teeth.

Some moments later...

"Jean, is that really the man who stands at the top of the Magicmasters?"

"If you speak to him carelessly, you will have your legs swept out from under you, Lady Lithia. Our army only suffered so few casualties during *that* excursion because Alus was there."

"So that's how it was."

Lithia and Jean looked up the stairs. Alus and Cicelnia had already disappeared into the fortress.

*Alus, why'd you have to do that... well, I'm sure there was no ill will meant toward us. Probably.* Jean didn't think too much deeper into it. But he couldn't help but be bothered by how Alus had treated Rusalca's ruler in front of his own.

It would be overly shallow to assume that Alus was planning to move to Rusalca. Which meant that perhaps that had been courtesy he showed to Lithia as an individual.

However... knowing Alus' personality, Jean scoffed at that idea. That can't have been it.

So maybe it was to spite Cicelnia. Everything added up if that was the cause, but the reason remained unknown. Well, knowing their personalities, maybe they'd quarreled ahead of time. *Perhaps Lady Cicelnia misjudged how to handle him.*

Jean knew very well that Alus didn't act according to his age and appearance. However, he decided to forget about politics as he'd already found something else to look forward to. After all, this was the first time the Singles from the other nations would see the top-ranked Magicmaster.

Lithia, staring at Jean's profile, must have guessed what he was thinking, as she had a pleased smile as well. "I see. It is his debut, after all. It would not be strange if anything were to happen."

"... Yes, but we should watch out so that somebody doesn't stir up trouble for themselves," Jean replied, but he looked as though he were waiting for the entertainment to begin.

\* \* \*

Inside a room suitable for a ruler.

Unlike the room Alus had rested in, careful consideration had been put into the furnishings in this room. That much could be gleaned from just the canopy bed within.

The utmost efforts had been put into the extravagance of the room, but Alus felt like he'd get sick at the mere thought of spending more than a day in it.

Right now, a heavy atmosphere dominated the room. The reason, of course, was Alus.

Cicelnia sat on a luxurious sofa, her legs crossed, with a marble table in front of her. Next to her was Rinne, who gracefully restrained herself to keep from angering the beast any further.

"Now you have done it."

"Done what?" Alus sat down on the sofa facing them, and tilted his head on purpose.

"There is no way you are not aware of it. I know. I know this very well."

Cicelnia ripped off the veil covering her face. Her feathered eyebrows could be seen below her neatly trimmed bangs. She had long curled eyelashes and golden eyes that drew you in. Neither sculptors nor painters would be able to perfectly replicate her beauty.







Alus had no interest in her, but if he was asked who the most beautiful woman he knew was, he'd have no choice but to say Cicelnia's name.

The ruler herself seemed quite upset, but she made the pretty picture even then. She had a sullen look, pouting with rounded cheeks, which gave her an adorable impression on top of her beauty.

Alus said, "This will be my first meeting with the other nations' Singles, so some distance would be suitable."

"Let me be the leader, will you?" Cicelnia said.

Alus' actions from before were a check to ensure that Cicelnia wouldn't use him, and it was also meant as a threat, saying that he wouldn't mind moving to another nation.

And he'd used Lithia to accomplish it. As Rusalca had strength on par with Alpha, the threat came off as even more realistic. And Cicelnia's and Lithia's poor relationship also worked in his favor.

It was clear that Cicelnia believed Alus would obey her as he was one of Alpha's Magicmasters. That's what Alus didn't like.

Alus suspected that she was looking for political dominance, though it was pointless to worry over it. She might have that kind of side to her, but she wouldn't show her true colors that easily.

While she might not be looking to become the leader of the seven nations, she did want to have the most influence of all the rulers. It was practically a given for those in her position. And for that reason she needed to make effective use of the No. 1 Magicmaster.

However, her opponent wasn't about to become her pawn that easily.

Not only had her intentions been crushed, but she'd lost face, so she spat out words of irritation. "Alus, you are Alpha's Magicmaster, so work in ways that benefit Alpha."

"..."

"As I'm sure you're aware, you transferring to another nation will never be accepted."

"..."

"You only need to listen to what I say. Alus, with your strength, we will be able to put the other nations in our debt. To start, perhaps retaking a remote region would... be... a... good..."

In that instant, the atmosphere in the room froze over.

Changing from heavy to overpowering with bloodlust mixed in.

That wasn't something you directed towards a ruler. And it was of course coming from the insolent boy sitting across the table.

Within a fraction of a second, Rinne experienced herself dying, despite serving as the ruler's bodyguard and being well-versed in military arts.

With her forehead covered in sweat, Rinne placed herself in front of Cicelnia. An act worthy of praise.

As for Cicelnia, who wasn't even a Magicmaster... she held her hand against her chest and struggled to breathe. Her beautiful glossy lips moved as if she was starving for oxygen.

While she was a sharp ruler, she was in her position because of her royal bloodline, and didn't have much resistance against this kind of thing.

Alus knew her charisma wasn't solely due to her blood. However—

"Don't misunderstand." His cold voice tore through the frozen atmosphere. And his words pelted Cicelnia's ears as if they were icicles. "Alpha doesn't matter to me. I'm only here because I owe Berwick. In that sense, I guess you can say that you appointing him as Governor-General was a good move... but don't think that gives you the right to order me around."

With her body trembling, Cicelnia was unable to answer. Her face pale, she cast her eyes down, staring at the marble table's design.

"But I don't think Berwick would be amused to hear that you looked down on other nations either..."

"Sir Alus!!" Finally, Rinne somehow managed to raise her voice.

Alus glanced over to Cicelnia, and held back on his bloodlust. Emitting bloodlust was something he'd picked up while working behind the scenes. It was completely different from what normal Magicmasters could do.

Magicmasters sometimes deliberately leaked some mana as a means to intimidate or as a show of force. But Alus' bloodlust made his opponents experience death, to the point of even hallucinating it.

"Anyways, I apologize for being rude... but well, now that you've experienced this once you should be fine facing the other Singles," Alus said emotionlessly to Cicelnia, who just barely managed to avoid crumbling into the sofa.

Rinne took deep breaths and then posed a question. The fact that it took several seconds couldn't be helped. "What do you mean? Lady Cicelnia faces the Singles every year."

"I'll be here this time. And we can't have her wetting herself in front of the other nations' rulers."

"Wet? ...!"

Realizing what he meant, Rinne held her tongue.

Alus' words were only a shot in the dark and given as an example... it was a blunder unbecoming of a lady, but looking at Cicelnia blushing in shame made it clear that it was the truth.

"W-Who... who are you saying would do something like that?" Cicelnia ground out.

"Hmm, so you don't hold the seat of ruler for nothing."

Cicelnia's unyielding eyes stared willfully at Alus' cold eyes. She violently ruffled up her bangs stuck to the beads of sweat on her forehead with a puffed-out breath, as she continued to roughly breathe in silence.

But a fearless smile had already returned to her lips, despite it being only from pride. The feeling was also accompanied by shame as she felt the sensation of her wet thighs.

"What are you going to do? Sentence me to death for *lèse-majesté*? I don't care."

"If I do that, you really will defect to another nation."

To think she could still keep up with the retorts after all that... Alus' evaluation of her force of will went up. She really couldn't be underestimated.

Alus had held back on his bloodlust so that she wouldn't faint. But he had intended to beat that haughty attitude out of her so that she wouldn't be able to act so brashly against Singles. He'd underestimated her, thinking she wouldn't have the courage to pursue the matter, but in reflecting on his actions he felt he'd gone a little too far.

At the same time—

"Sir Alus, I won't hesitate next time," Rinne said.

Of course, she didn't think she'd be able to do something against him if he was serious. But she still had her duties as a bodyguard. She'd said it to keep him in check, but its effect was questionable at best.

Moreover, the upcoming conference was concerning as well. As it would be the first time Alus was attending, he would garner attention whether he liked it or not because of his rank.

It was more than possible that the other nations' Singles would make light of him because of his young age and try to meddle with him. In reality, Alus was almost convinced that would happen, which was why he did something as reckless as testing Cicelnia ahead of time.

Things would be so easy if every Single was like Jean, Alus thought; but after closely considering it, he had a very curious side to him.

That could bring about its own set of problems.

Some time passed.

Alus had been waiting for the two women to recover. After a few minutes, Rinne was back to normal, but Cicelnia still had some ways to go.

She spent over ten minutes drinking water and resting her body until her breathing finally settled down. During that time she'd glance over in Alus' direction and sigh meaningfully.

"... Seeing how bad you look makes even me feel a little guilty."

"Whose fault do you think that is? Experience that guilt to its fullest extent! ...If you are even capable of feeling guilt, that is." It seemed she had at least recovered enough to hurl abuse.

The next moment, she slumped over the table as if she'd gotten sick of it all. She let out a soft sigh as she pressed her face against the cold marble. After whispering a quiet, "I am changing," she raised her head and then stood up as if fully recovered. "I let out a lot of perspiration because of a certain someone, so I am changing clothes. Rinne, preparations!"

"O-Of course!"

Dignity returned to Cicelnia's voice, which echoed throughout the room.

The two women disappeared into the inner rooms, while Alus was kicked out.

Once in the dressing room, Cicelnia let out a heavy sigh as she entrusted her body to Rinne.

Rinne smiled wryly in response. "He really went and did it. That's the kind of person Sir Alus is."

"I know that! He only came this time because Lettie is on a mission, right?"

"Well, Sir Alus is participating in the Friendship Magical Tournament as well. If not for that, he might not have shown up as usual."

In that case, Cicelnia would've had to bring a Double Digit Magicmaster. That was something she'd rather avoid. Being Alpha's ruler, the Magicmaster she brought with her needed to serve as a symbol for Alpha's strength.

If that Magicmaster was overpowered by the Magicmasters of other nations, Alpha would lose all of its dignity.

Just imagining it made Cicelnia grimace. As she did, the strap holding up her dress was removed, and it fell to the ground without a sound.

Without showing any concern over her body being exposed, Cicelnia took a step forward and completely stripped out of the rest of her clothing.

Rinne wordlessly put her hands on Cicelnia's underwear to change them as usual, but... as she touched it she stopped.

She had spotted a damp spot in the white fabric. "Uhm, Lady Cicelnia... did you really...?" Of course, there was no way that she would be fine after being exposed to that kind of bloodlust.

Yet Cicelnia put on a brave face, and Rinne glanced up at her. As she did, Cicelnia, unable to bear the shame, turned her head away and nodded once.

Having seen an unexpectedly vulnerable side of her master, Rinne kept quiet out of consideration for her feelings.

However, Rinne was supposed to have experienced the same thing, so her master asked her with a suspicious expression, "Rinne, what about you?"

"Eh? I-I didn't really..." Rinne shook her head, but her master wouldn't accept it, as her expression turned impish.

"You did too... right?" Cicelnia asked with a big smile, as she grabbed hold of Rinne's well-shaped breasts.

"... Yes." Rinne didn't have it in her to keep shaking her head if the ruler insisted otherwise.

"Then let us go shower together," Cicelnia said, sadistically ordering her loyal subordinate, as if shaking off the unpleasant memories from before.

\* \* \*

The rulers conference was taking place in the grand conference room on the fifth and top floor of the fortress.

The three were together up until the fourth floor, but as a servant Rinne wasn't allowed beyond that. Only the ruler and their guard of honor were allowed; in other words, only Cicelnia and Alus passed through the scanners manned by servants. This was a normal procedure to ensure that no AWRs or weapons were brought in.

After they went through without any issues, Rinne saw the two off with a straightened posture. "I will be awaiting you here."

"Yes, I will see you later," Cicelnia said.

Alus walked one step behind Cicelnia. She wore a very similar dress to when she arrived that was open in the back, and the veil covered her face once more. The veil was a supposed necessity for the rulers conference. From what Alus heard, it was meant to keep any prejudice due to age or position at a minimum.

While she looked as if she'd recovered, upon closer examination, Cicelnia's steps seemed somewhat unsteady.

*I guess I went overboard with the threat.*

Seeing her slightly stiff back, Alus recognized that he was at fault and decided to give her a helping hand if needed.

That was a decision he made after feeling the abnormal atmosphere coming from the grand conference room. It was an overwhelmingly dense flow of mana that he couldn't help but sense even with the doors closed.

Because of the incident between Alus and Cicelnia, they were the last to arrive. Inside were the rulers and the notorious Magicmasters accompanying them.

Even Alus felt a little sympathy for Cicelnia who had to walk ahead of him due to her position. The closer they got, the shorter her steps became and Alus almost caught up to her.

"Lady Cicelnia? Would you like me to go ahead?"

"I-I am fine. Just so you know... it is your fault that we are late." Cicelnia turned around to reveal a twitching smile, and then took a deep breath.

Alus walked up to her side and grabbed hold of the heavy door's handle. "Then let's go," he said, and opened the door.

As he did so, something practically gushed out.

It was the aura of rivalry and force, or rather a torrent of chaotic mana evaluating them. It blew at them like a gale from the depths of the room.

Inside the room were six rulers seated at a round table. And behind each of them was a Magicmaster standing at attention. Like Cicelnia, the other rulers also hid their faces behind veils.

The first thing that caught Alus' eye was the dome of mana structured around the six rulers. *A Mana Canceler, huh.* It was high-ranking magic that would easily shut down any wayward spell.

He didn't know who had cast it, but it was clear they hadn't used an AWR, so they weren't a Single for nothing. *I wonder if it's also meant to keep any leaking mana from reaching the rulers too.*

As he thought this, the eyes of the room focused on them, putting on pressure. However, they weren't staring at Cicelnia, but rather at the boy behind her, Alus himself.

Alus easily brushed off that pressure and glanced over the room.

And the moment his eyes crossed with a brawny man, said man barged forward towards him.

The presence around the giant man was clearly from a high-ranking Magicmaster. As proof that he wasn't coming up to give Alus a friendly handshake, he was putting out immense pressure.

Cicelnia's body trembled. The man was staring straight at Alus, not paying any attention to Cicelnia, but the pressure still made her feel like her small body would be blown away.

Seeing how she managed to keep standing, Alus gave her a passing grade and put his hand on her back. Then... the mana he poured into her had a warmth to it, and it flowed through her stiff body.

"...!"

Feeling this, Cicelnia rapidly calmed down and focused on that warm and gentle power. He wasn't using a spell. It was the first time she'd experienced mana itself flowing into her.

Her own mana reacted to Alus' mana, and after some minor repulsion and shifting she could more vividly feel her own mana. Though it differed from person to person, sensing the mana flowing in your body was very effective in increasing focus and calming down.

Cicelnia never would've imagined a weapon used against Fiends would have this kind of use as well. Thinking about it calmly she'd only been caught up in this, and she was able to recover enough presence of mind to not bring shame to her status. She glanced over at Alus for a moment.

Aside from the surprise, Alus could feel some gratitude coming from her, but he had something more important to do...

He took a step forward, standing in front of Cicelnia.

A loud voice without any restraint came from the giant man. "It's your first appearance here and you're the last to arrive. Here I was thinking you didn't understand the rules of adults... but to think you really were just a brat!"

*We're not that late... so this is one of those things,* Alus thought to himself, having realized the man's true intentions.

Perhaps the other rulers had conspired to arrive ahead of time so that they could await Cicelnia and Alus.

Alus searched his memories for the giant man speaking in an unnatural-sounding tone of voice and recalled the name of the rank No. 8 Magicmaster, Galgnis Theotort.

The man looked a little older, but he should still be only 30. As for what nation he belonged to... Alus pulled out the data he had on the man inside his head and compared it to the person in front of him.

But still, the scars on the man's bulging muscles, unusual to see on a Magicmaster, stood out. There were countless scars all over him, from hands to arms to his face.

He had swept-back hair, an angular face, sharp eyes and an aggressive atmosphere, giving him the impression of a wild beast.

*Impressive.* Deciding to appraise the man's strength before recalling the nation he belonged to, Alus found himself respecting his well-trained muscles that wouldn't lose out to magic.

But that was all. He found nothing else impressive about the man before him.

It appeared Galgnis was the only Magicmaster here that was being openly hostile. The rest of the lineup was letting out mana as a show of their nation's force, but there was no hostility or enmity in it.

"What has the world come to if someone like this is No. 1? I bet you only got the position from playing with the results. Alpha sure has lost its touch," Galgnis said in a condescending tone, having moved on from appraising Alus.

And then, of all things—he went on to boast about how he'd be able to rise up in the rankings by defeating Alus.

Feeling how much of a pain this was, Alus glanced over towards Jean, who remained stationary with a bitter expression. He seemed to be cautious of doing anything that might impact Rusalca's political position.

Lithia also sent worried looks their way, but she was in the same position.

The rest were likewise silently watching over the situation. They probably had their own thoughts on the matter, but figured that this was a good chance to see the No. 1 Magicmaster's abilities first hand.

But if nobody was going to interfere, that also meant that nobody would complain if Alus did something about it himself.

*Now then,* Alus thought to himself, as he considered his options.

He'd already abandoned the idea of resolving things peacefully, and was deliberating over what was the best way to deal with the man and make him reconsider his attitude. He didn't care about being looked down on himself, but having Alpha taken lightly would be problematic in the future. Especially with the Friendship Magical Tournament just around the corner.

*Can't say I like it, but in the end things will go like the princess expected, he thought, glancing over to Cicelnia behind him.*

She was acting unfazed, but Alus noticed her slender fingers were holding on to his sleeve.

It was a pain, but dealing with this situation meant showing Alpha's strength to the other rulers, which was also the role she had asked him to play before.

Faced with the giant of a man he'd have to crank his head upwards to see, Alus tapped his foot against the floor with a fed-up expression.



Seeing that, Galgnis put on a confident smile. He then moved on to do something to provoke Alus and even the nation of Alpha.

The moment he pushed his massive mana past Alus and towards Cicelnia behind him—

The sound of the ground being hit twice, followed by a sharp swishing sound like a whip tearing through the air, rang out.

“Ack?!”

Galgnis’ massive frame collapsed as he fell to a knee before Alus. With that, they were finally on the same eye level.





Without a moment's delay, Alus wrapped his arm around Galgnis' neck and grabbed the shoulder on the opposite side. Nobody in the room had perceived this fluid motion.

He then brought his mouth next to Galgnis' ear and coldly spoke. His voice was low, but his enunciation was clear enough to ensure everyone in the room could properly hear him.

"Put away this disgusting mana right now, or I'll have no problem killing you on the spot."

His somewhat serious bloodlust mixed in with his words probably made everyone feel like the temperature in the room dropped by a few degrees.

But Galgnis himself seemed slow on the uptake, as he instead shivered with rage, making even more mana flow out of his massive frame.

"I thought I told you to put it away. Can't you even do something like that? Geez, what a handful."

Maintaining his posture, Alus unleashed his other type of mana for an instant.

It happened in the blink of an eye, and by the time anyone noticed, the mana filling the room had disappeared without a trace. Including the Mana Canceled protecting the rulers.

"—!!"

"Wha—?!"

Everyone was astonished by what had just happened, and they all stared at the boy who acted like nothing was wrong.

That included Jean as well, but that couldn't be helped. Alus hadn't shown him this power before either.

He had unleashed Gra Eater, his special ability that devoured mana. And it had devoured everything in a moment.

That should be more than enough of a show of force, Alus thought. An unexplainable phenomenon invited fear. And it would keep anyone from acting too rashly.

Alus removed his arm from Galgnis and patted his shoulder. "There won't be another time, got it?"

He then took Cicelnia by her hand and guided her to the empty seat near Galgnis who was still frozen in shock. She still wasn't all there, but she came to her senses when she sat down.

Unsure if that had been a sufficient show of force or not, she still had a satisfied look on her face, with ambition burning in her eyes. The way she elegantly readjusted how she sat in her chair, and took the initiative to show off, indicated that she wouldn't go down without a fight.

After seating Cicelnia, Alus took a step back, which happened to be right near Galgnis who was still down on one knee.

"Hah?!" That was when Galgnis snapped back to reality and swung out with an enchanted backhanded blow.

The arm tore through the air but Alus showed no signs of dodging or taking defensive measures.

“—!!”

The room fell silent like it had frozen over for an instant.

However—

“Galgnis, you shouldn’t go any further than that.”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little too rude in front of the rulers?”

“How unsightly, old man.”

Jean grabbed hold of Galgnis’ head and pushed it to the floor, while the rank No. 2 Magicmaster Vajet Olagram stepped on his left arm, and the rank No. 4 Magicmaster Fanon Trooper restrained his enchanted right arm with magic and swung up her heel, poised over him as if to stomp down on his body.

Restrained by this group of three, Galgnis couldn’t move a muscle.

From a Magicmaster’s point of view, it was clear that his previous action was a reflex born out of fear. That was why he’d used a sloppy attack consisting of simply infusing mana into his fist. Having been shown the difference in their abilities, an attack like that would be like pricking an elephant with a sewing needle. It was suicidal. It was by no means an attack thrown out due to hostility.

You could even say Galgnis had already lost his will to fight before attacking. That’s why Alus didn’t even bother dealing with it, there was no need to. But that was something only first-rate Magicmasters could tell.

“Stop that, Galgnis!”

Interpreting Galgnis’ action as hostile, a man in the prime of his life stood from his seat across the table to keep him from losing his life. While his face was hidden behind his veil, judging from his voice he was probably around the same age as Berwick.

This was the ruler of Halcapdia, a nation to the west neighboring Rusalca.

“S-Sorry... I lost control of myself.” As the restrained Galgnis meekly replied to the ruler, the three Magicmasters let go of him.

Alus once more slowly looked over the room, confirming the people he saw. Aside from Jean and Galgnis, he stared at each and every new face.

First was the No. 2 Magicmaster from the eastern nation of Iblis, Vajet Olagram. He was tall and slender and had even facial features, making him a good-looking man. His long navy blue hair was neatly arranged behind his head, and he had sharp eyes peeking out from behind his bangs.

He was 26 years old. He didn’t have his AWR with him now, but he was known to use a long sword.

The next was Fanon Trooper, rank No. 4 Magicmaster from Clevideet, the nation neighboring Alpha on the opposite side of Rusalca. She was the third female Single. At 19 years old, she was the second youngest after Alus.

She had light purple hair tied back on the sides. At 150cm she was on the small side. She looked young for her age, and Alus had worried that she might come at him as well. The reason for that was that he'd heard some negative things about her, but it appeared that she was more logical than that.

Fanon was infamous for being a clean-freak, and he'd heard stories about how she'd crushed the balls of a subordinate who touched her when stained with a Fiend's blood.

He'd also heard tales that she'd had the squad captain shield her against Fiends while she changed out of dirty clothing, of course while ensuring that a barrier was firmly cast around her.

In other words, the Mana Canceler around the rulers was probably Fanon's doing.

As an expert in defensive magic, she was known by the alias of Iron Wall. She was the reason why Clevideet, and not Alpha or Rusalca, was known as the sturdiest of the seven nations.

Moreover, despite her specialization in defense, she actively went out on missions in the Outer World, a usually unthinkable trait for someone skilled in defensive magic. She was a fighter at heart. And it was probably that personality of hers that brought her all the way up to Single status.

As a fellow male, Alus could tell what Fanon had raised her heel to crush while Galgnis was restrained. He also didn't overlook her almost ecstatic and sadistic look as she held her heel above him. That's why he resolved himself to never have anything to do with her.

Having eventually stood up, with all eyes on him, Galgnis took a knee in front of Cicelnia. "Please forgive my rudeness, Lady Cicelnia il Arlzeit." In this situation, an apology wouldn't be directed to Alus who served as a guard of honor.

"I am just pleased that neither side was hurt."

After Cicelnia spoke to him, Galgnis deeply apologized to the rulers of the other nations. He then returned to his original position, keeping his eyes cast down as he showed his gratitude.

Like his information said, Galgnis appeared to be a very aggressive man, though he didn't exceed Alus' expectations, so there was no problem.

Of course, like he'd said, he would only forgive Galgnis this once.

Finally, Alus turned his glance toward one more Single. A person who showed no concern whatsoever over what had just happened.

He did react, in the sense that he didn't make any moves, but he seemed wholly unconcerned by the entire ordeal, even if Galgnis were to die... That indifference and cold-heartedness was similar to Alus in a way.

This was the rank No. 5 Magicmaster hailing from the northern nation of Hydrange, Kurokel Ifertas.

He was leaning against the wall on his lonesome, reading a book. He was around Jean's age. More specifically, he was 23 years old, with a slim build, and wearing black-rimmed glasses, giving off a composed impression.

Kurokel had ashen bangs hanging over his eyes, and the rest of his hair was slightly messy. Appearance-wise, he looked like the kind of guy who would dislike fighting the most.

As Hydrange was on the opposite end of Babel from Alpha information from there was scarce, but like Balmes it had little territory and not much to show for their battle against Fiends. That was likely because Kurokel didn't go on missions in the Outer World.

Alus' first impression of him was that he was less of a fighter and more of an eccentric, frail scholar. Thinking they could perhaps exchange research notes, he glanced at the book he was holding.

*Ah, no good. It's a novel.*

It looked like a big epic one. But when he saw that all of the leaders had gathered, he closed the book and positioned himself behind Hydrange's ruler to fulfill his guard duty.

That was about all that stood out about him, Alus thought, as he looked back to Cicelnia.

"I am sorry about that, Lady Cicelnia."

"There is no need to worry, I am fine."

Alus saw Halcapdia's ruler apologizing to Cicelnia once more over not being able to stop Galgnis from running amok.

"I really am fine. Instead, you should be speaking to him."

As Cicelnia looked Alus' way, Halcapdia's ruler turned to Alus. "I am sorry about that, Sir Alus. Please allow me to apologize by..."

The richer someone was, the more likely they were to resolve troubles with money. Alus inwardly shrugged at that nobility-like way of thinking, but he couldn't ignore him when he was being generous. Disregarding a ruler's goodwill wasn't a good look.

That's why he came up with a different way to resolve things that didn't rely on money, and raised his hand to stop the ruler. "There's no need for that. Instead, would you please allow me to say something?"

The rulers looked at each other, but there were no objections. Representing them, Halcapdia's ruler gave Alus their consent by nodding.

"Well then, there's a Magicmaster I don't know here, would you mind introducing him?" Alus asked, as he looked over towards Balmes' ruler, and the others followed suit. Everyone present had actually been wondering the same thing.

Standing behind Balmes' ruler was a dull-looking older man.

Ever since the incident with Galgnis began, he'd been trembling in fear, with cold sweat running down his forehead.

He wasn't a good match for this place, shrinking back to the point of almost disappearing. His very being seemingly exuded weakness.

It was to the point that you almost felt bad for the guy. As the discussion shifted to him, his face turned pale and he twitched just from Alus' words alone.

If Alus truly had any consideration for the man, it might have been best to simply let him be. But if he was a Single, Alus at least wanted to know his name.

Perhaps to wipe off sweat, Balmes' ruler brought a handkerchief beneath his veil in a fluster.

Seeing as how things weren't going anywhere, Alus brought up a familiar name. "Would he perhaps be Mr. Duncal?"

Answering him wasn't Balmes' overweight ruler, but the man himself. "N-No... I am Bebet Ijous. I just recently reached the rank of No. 74. A rank someone as inexperienced as me is not worthy of... being able to come face to face with you Singles this time is an h-honor..." he stuttered, introducing himself in a trembling voice.

Following up was Balmes' ruler. "Sir Duncal is currently out on a mission, so he is serving as his replacement."

*Oh yeah, I think Jean said something about that.* But in that case, they could have just brought Gileada who was ranked No. 20. She was a former Single too, Alus thought to himself. But if she wasn't here, Gileada might be participating in that mission as well.

He still had his doubts, but sticking his nose into other nations' business was overstepping his boundaries. At any rate, if he wasn't a Single then there was no need to hear any further details about him, so Alus lost interest in him.

However, no matter how much he stood out here, not being able to even introduce himself properly only sullied his nation's dignity. Bebet, most likely in his late 30s, looked really pitiful. Considering how timid he looked, he would probably wet himself before Cicelnia did if something were to happen.

Balmes' ruler sighed in exasperation at Bebet's disgraceful behavior, but that was all. Perhaps he wasn't too concerned with reputation.

Bebet must have been overwhelmed by Galgnis' dense mana that he released during the incident, and that Magicmaster had been easily forced onto his knees by Alus. At rank No. 74, he must have been made well aware of the difference in ability and how out of place he was.

If he was going to be that nervous, then he should have been inside of the Mana Canceled alongside the rulers, Alus thought, like it had nothing to do with him. But he soon reconsidered, seeing as how that would've been far more disgraceful. If a Magicmaster representing that nation's strength were to do that, any dignity they had would be all but lost.

"Will that suffice, Sir Alus?"

"Yes, thank you very much," Alus answered Balmes' ruler, and put an end to the topic.

He then directed his attention towards Cicelnia. From his position behind and slightly to the side, he could see the edges of her lips curl up into a smile.



Alus didn't know what she was thinking. Was there really something that interesting in what they just talked about? He didn't have a clue. Besides, they were in completely different positions. What they experienced and saw was equally different.

"Now then, we are all busy, so let us get right to it, shall we?" Halcapdia's ruler said, and signaled the start of the conference.

"Well, there is no need to be in such a rush. It is not often that we all assemble."

"Not to mention that Sir Alus is here this time, so why not take it a little slower?"

Trying not to lose the initiative, the other rulers spoke out.

But Lithia's voice was not among them. Jean whispered something in her ear, and she remained silent instead.

"Everyone, I do not believe remarks with those kinds of intentions are suitable for this place," Cicelnia said with a big smile, tapping the table and calling the rulers to attention.

Seeing Alus standing expressionlessly behind her, nobody else spoke out. There were some with bitter looks, but that was all. This time, it was Alpha that came out on top.

With the room falling silent, Cicelnia made her proclamation first. "The nation of Alpha approves the opening of the 40th annual Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament." Pressing the seal only rulers were allowed to use on a thick parchment, she then placed the parchment on the table.

Cicelnia rotated the turntable and stopped the parchment in front of the next ruler.

It was customary to raise any objections before stamping the parchment with the ruler's seal. And when an objection was raised, a discussion would be held about the issue. Because of that, these conferences sometimes lasted as long as three days.

Rusalca's Lithia followed suit and consented to the tournament by stamping the parchment with her seal.

As she did so, she suddenly spoke up as if recalling something. "Speaking of which, I recall hearing that Sir Alus will be participating this year."

"—!!"

A silent astonishment visibly spread through not just the rulers, but the Magicmasters as well. Though it was much more noticeable in the rulers.

In contrast, Cicelnia acted like that had nothing to do with this. "Alus enrolled in the Institute this year, so that is just his given right, is it not?"

"Nobody has said anything about disallowing his participation, Ms. Cicelnia. But as a Magicmaster with the title of Single, I was merely worrying over the unlikely case that something might happen to the other students participating," Lithia said.

Those words made the rulers remember the difference in ability and the chance of accidents happening during the matches. They wanted to avoid losing future combat potential over unexpected accidents.

Only Alus could give the most accurate answer for Lithia's worry. "In that regard, I wish that you would trust in my abilities as a Magicmaster with said title. I can guarantee that there won't be any such unlikely cases."

"...! Oh no, I was not doubting your abilities, Sir Alus!"

*Then what*, Alus wanted to say, but held his tongue. Perhaps him giving her a direct answer came as unexpected, since Lithia hurriedly corrected herself.

Alus smiled. "But I can understand that you would worry."

Hearing that, the other rulers gave looks of relief. Whether that was because they were spared experiencing Alus' anger a second time, or if they were happy to know their students would be safe during the tournament was uncertain.

After that, the parchment was smoothly sent from ruler to ruler.

Until it reached a sudden stop at Balmes' ruler.

Everyone looked his way with suspicion.

After hesitating for a moment, he spoke up. "I have a proposal to make... how about we loosen the restrictions this year?"

Balmes' ruler observed everyone's reactions as he made his suggestion. His outward expression looked composed as he checked their responses, but in reality he was putting on a brave front to keep anyone from realizing that he was in great fear when he made his proposal.

There had been previous suggestions for altering the tournament's established rules in the past, but most were resolved almost immediately, and things had proceeded smoothly since Cicelnia had become a ruler.

"Loosen them how, specifically?" the ruler closest to Balmes' ruler inquired.

"Well, more specifically, I do not think it would even be considered a restriction. I am simply suggesting that we officially permit the recruiting of students."

"—!!"

He'd carefully omitted 'of other nations' but clear unrest spread through the rest of the rulers.

Inviting students of other nations that caught the ruler's eye during the tournament was frowned upon. The individual's wishes were respected as much as possible, but in those cases the nations concerned had a political discussion between them behind the scenes.

This suggestion was to bring these kinds of movements more into the open. Balmes was actually the nation that had the most apprehensions about its survival. Doubles aside, when it came to Singles there were rumors that they were falsifying results to bring them up, and they were lacking serious firepower. That was why all rulers present understood that Balmes wanted to secure promising students.

They could understand his motivation, but when it came to risking the loss of their novice Magicmasters it was a different story.

They didn't want to just have enough to replenish their military, but also leave room for growth in the future, and having another nation steal that from them would affect that nation's future power. Nobody present would approve of this suggestion, even if it was to equalize the military strength amongst all nations so that they could protect humanity as one.

The problem was whether this suggestion had been brought up after witnessing Alus' display of force, or if it had been thought of before.

Or rather, either way it was problematic. Especially for Alpha.

"I cannot permit that."

Cicelnia, of course, was the first to speak up. At the same time she sent a sharp glance in Lithia's direction, and then somewhat anxiously looked over towards Alus.

From Cicelnia's point of view, this situation was brought on by Lithia mentioning Alus' appearance in the tournament. In the worst case, she might have been working together with Balmes' ruler to make this happen.

It was also clear that she was bothered by what could be described as an excessive showing of respect for Lithia at the stairs.

To Alus, it was nothing but a means to strike back at his selfish ruler, but to Cicelnia the threat of his moving to a different nation felt strangely real, despite Alus not having any intention of doing something like that.

As a student participating in the tournament, Alus was a potential target for recruitment. If Balmes' ruler made this suggestion to strike at that chance... Cicelnia shuddered at the thought.

"Balmes has few Magicmasters of its own. At this rate, we might be unable to respond to an emergency," Balmes' ruler said, making an emotional appeal.

Exposing his own nation's weakness was shameful, but the state of his nation was clear to all, and if it would be possible to replenish the nation's Magicmasters by abandoning his pride he wasn't against doing so. Among the rulers, he seemed less interested in keeping up appearances. That was why, even if he might be underestimated, he could be quite the utilitarian.

Cicelnia's eyes restlessly ran around the room. *This is bad.*

Nobody else immediately raised any objections. If anything, they seemed to be taking his proposal into consideration.

The suggestion came with the risk of a nation losing its own personnel. Normally that kind of suggestion wouldn't proceed so smoothly, but it seemed Alus' overwhelming display, which Cicelnia had been happy to see, was working against her.

At this rate, Balmes' ruler's proposal would be considered seriously. Whether there were objections or not, it would be decided by majority vote after a discussion.

Cicelnia imagined the immeasurable loss of having Alus move to a different nation. Indeed, risking losing the greatest Magicmaster was

nothing but a massive demerit. She knew that Alus was responsible for the majority of the military gains that made Alpha the powerful nation that it was. She was the one who had presided over the award ceremonies, after all.

In fact, even if all of Alpha's other students were stolen by other nations, as long as Alus remained that would be worth it.

Aside from Cicelnia, Balmes' ruler noted the silence and continued with a smile, "It appears everyone feels that it is worthy of consideration. Then shall we hold a vote about it?"

"Please wait a moment. I am not sure what to think of how a nation would survive if it so easily relies on other nations' forces to bolster its own. While it might work for a while, will a nation truly be able to defend itself into the future using that kind of method? In the case of an invasion by a high-classed Fiend, you could just ask for the assistance of another nation. Of course, Alpha would not hesitate to offer its help if that happens."

Cicelnia expected she would receive a rebuttal, but she couldn't stop herself from trying. The potential consequences were far too severe for her to wait and see the results. It was conceivable that Alpha would return to becoming a weak nation.

Despite having the rank No. 7, Lettie, Alus was just worth that much, and Alpha losing its status would also destroy Cicelnia's ambitions.

"Lady Cicelnia's opinion does make for a good point, but we must look to the reality that is the present before the future. We are in a position where we must take hands and protect humanity... having just a single nation's borders breached will put Babel at risk. Even if we request aid from other nations in case of an emergency, do you believe the Fiends would simply wait for reinforcements to arrive?" Balmes' ruler asked of the room.

"...! Then at least allow me to make another suggestion..." Cicelnia felt flustered inside, but remained calm and smiled as she plainly spoke to the rulers. "I propose that we select the participants for the demonstration from the competitors."

A slight unrest filled the room. It was customary for active-duty Magicmasters to hold a martial arts performance during the tournament, which was what Cicelnia referred to when she said 'demonstration.' It was also a show of force by each of the nations. Her roundabout way of referring to it was her way of putting up a bit of resistance.

"That is a wonderful idea. Most of all, it will encourage the competitors. This year will be more exciting than ever." Balmes' ruler, who'd brought up loosening the restrictions, took the initiative to give his endorsement. Of course, he already knew which competitor Cicelnia was thinking of for Alpha's demonstration.

That made his endorsement all the more strange, but there was still the possibility that Balmes' ruler's suggestion wasn't aimed at stealing away Alus.

Either way, this wasn't even a suggestion. Cicelnia was merely informing the others that she would have him participate in the demonstration. It was the active-duty Magicmasters' job to make the tournament even more exciting.

Alus coldly watched over this exchange. To him it was nothing but a farce.

He wasn't planning on leaving Alpha until he repaid his debt to Berwick, no matter what profitable terms were dangled in front of him.

He might consider it, if he were told that he'd never have to fight Fiends or internal enemies again—but what nation would want a Magicmaster like that?

However, there was no way Cicelnia or the other rulers would know what Alus was thinking. Even if he were to mention it, nobody would believe him in a place like this. No matter how many times he'd try to tell Cicelnia not to worry about it, she would still have her doubts.

Perhaps because the other nations aside from Alpha shared a common interest, or maybe because Alus' show of force had been more impressive than expected, the situation turned against Cicelnia.

Balmes' ruler said, "Then once more, let us hold a vote. Those in agreement raise their hands."

The result was five for, and two against. Surprisingly enough, Rusalca's Lithia was the other to vote against it. Even though it was her bringing up Alus' participation that caused the vote. Cicelnia was sure that she would vote for it as well, but it seemed that Lithia hadn't expected this to happen either.

Thinking back on it, Lithia had brought it up after stamping the parchment with her seal, so she shouldn't have had any objections. In other words, Rusalca and Balmes weren't working together.

But the result was already determined. To Cicelnia it was the worst possible one. She bit her lip in silent anger beneath her veil.

"I would like to thank all of the nations' rulers for taking Balmes' distress into consideration."

A new parchment, including the article permitting the recruitment of tournament participants, was written down and Balmes' ruler calmly stamped his seal on it.

Obedying the majority vote, Cicelnia stamped it with a trembling hand and so did Lithia in quiet resignation.

"With this, the conference comes to its end," Balmes' ruler said, getting up from his seat. The other rulers followed suit one after another, leaving only Rusalca's and Alpha's rulers at the table.

"Ms. Lithia, just how are you going to make up for this?" With nowhere else to point her chagrin, Cicelnia directed it towards Lithia.

"I did not think it would come to that." Lithia's shoulders drooped, and the two rulers let out heavy sighs. "I doubt anyone would be able to recruit

Sir Alus anyways. But to be honest, if Jean was not on friendly terms with him, leaving me in the dark about his personality, I would have voted for it."

"—!"

Lithia gave Cicelnia a slightly spiteful smile, then glanced to the side.

"I don't suppose you would come over to us, would you, Alus?"

"Not right now at least," Alus casually answered Jean's question.

"Which means... Lady Lithia."

"I know. We have excellent Magicmasters that we cannot afford to have plucked from us this year too." Lithia sighed once more. "Take some countermeasures for it, at least," she said to Jean, giving him some instructions.

Rusalca's attitude aside, Cicelnia had a hard time trusting Alus' denial about moving to another nation, especially since Alus had replied with a 'Not right now.'

Losing a Triple Digit or a student was one thing, but losing a Single Digit was unheard of, and Cicelnia seemed to be thinking that it wasn't impossible. In reality, behind her bitter expression she was desperately thinking up plans to keep him from being stolen away. For the time being, she would meet with Berwick first thing upon her return.

"Do you understand, Alus?"

From her tone of voice, the threat at the stairs had been very effective as there was no high-handed nuance in her words. If anything, she was pleading with him.

And as if to prove that, she continued, "Do not leave Alpha. Please." She said this in a small voice, with a worried look beneath her veil. The unexpectedly timid tone came as a surprise to even Cicelnia herself.

Lithia was startled to see this. While the relationship between ruler and Single was different in each nation, the ruler was typically on top. Moreover, she had a rivalry, alongside a sense of solidarity, with Alpha's ruler so she was well aware of how unyielding she could be.

But in this regard, Alus was simply too special. Only a handful of people within Alpha knew the reason behind Alus' seemingly infinite strength, and how so many of Alpha's achievements had been performed solely at his hands.

To all appearances, he was just a boy, but right now he was at the center of a whirlpool of politics concerning the seven rulers leading humanity into the future. However, it was questionable if Alus was aware of this.

"I don't have any intention to," Alus said, shrugging his shoulders at Cicelnia's worries, but because of her position she couldn't take him at his word.

Even if he wasn't telling the truth he wouldn't be punished. If he was punished he really might leave Alpha.

"That aside, while Balmes' Single might be ever changing I was under the impression that they had quite a few Doubles at their disposal," Jean almost casually voiced this opinion as he tilted his head.

Lithia spoke up in response. "That might be true, but they also have a lower number of Magicmasters compared to the other nations. Without the overwhelming power of a Single, a lack of Magicmasters is something to be concerned about... But I honestly did not think they were in such a pressing situation. Though there have been talks about sending a relief team over to Balmes in Rusalca, too."

There were voices of concern over Balmes' national strength in other nations as well. It had practically been used as an excuse during the conference, but even a single nation being unable to maintain the frontline against the Fiends would be a painful blow for humanity.

"Well, there is no helping it now. I will be returning to Alpha as soon as possible. What about you?"

"We will need to hold a discussion over in Rusalca as well. It might not require immediate measures, but we will need to move in a way that will avoid suspicion."

With the restrictions on recruiting students officially loosened, any overly forcible attempts to prevent that would cause discord between the nations. Any careless moves would risk getting them ostracized, so caution was required.

Despite that, Cicelnia was determined to do whatever it took to keep hold of Alus.

"Then, I will take my leave here. We will meet next at the Friendship Magical Tournament, Ms. Lithia."

"Indeed, but Rusalca will be the winner."

Cicelnia's only answer was a fearless smile. She left the room, taking Alus with her.

The two rulers were supposed to be on bad terms, but right now they spoke like old friends. Perhaps it was because they were both female rulers close in age and personality that made that happen.

The other rulers were long gone, and nobody else was in the hallway as Cicelnia increased her pace. Dinner was also on the schedule, but she would be canceling and returning home with Rinne.

By the time the two were outside it was already past noon.

Waiting for them were two carriages. One was large and luxurious, most likely prepared for Alus and Cicelnia. It was clear at first glance that it was for a ruler or nobility.

Rinne immediately noted her master's poor mood and questioned Alus with a glance, but he shrugged his shoulders with a sigh as if to say *ask her yourself*.

Once Cicelnia and Rinne were inside, Alus decided to close the door.

"What are you doing? Hurry up and get in," Cicelnia said suspiciously. Normally, not just anyone could ride in the same carriage as a ruler, but Alus was a Single and had come here for her sake to begin with.

But Alus shook his head. "No, I have some business to attend to."

“...!” A clearly displeased expression could be seen through the gaps in Cicelnia’s veil. One moment later... “Alus, I know that I can’t order you around, but what benefits could there be in your angering me any further? Or is that just your hobby?”

Alus was well aware that his staying behind would only invite further suspicion, especially after what had happened. But at the same time, that didn’t mean much to him. “You can interpret it however you like.” He felt like she didn’t have any right to put her nose into his business.

Unexpectedly enough, her answer came in the ill-mannered form of kicking her leg out of the carriage. At this rate, her leg might get squished in the door.

Since continuing this any longer would only waste more time, Alus gave her a brief explanation. “It’s a bit of personal business. I have to talk to Jean about something. He’s still here so I figured I’d talk to him while I could.”

“That will not do! If you are going to talk with someone from another nation, then please do so where I can see you. Lithia said she would be returning right away as well, so it shouldn’t take long. We will wait here until then. Got that, Rinne?”

“... Then I guess I’ll bring Jean over here. And if you want to get back as soon as possible, then don’t butt in.”

Just as Alus finished saying this, Lithia and Jean appeared from the fortress entrance. It looked like the second carriage was for Rusalca. With Cicelnia and Rinne watching over him, Alus headed towards them.

“Jean, do you have a moment?”

“What is it, Alus?”

Jean wore an amicable expression, but seeing the luxurious carriage that Cicelnia was in and how she appeared to be observing them, his face turned confused.

Leaving him aside for a moment, Alus called out to Lithia. “Lady Lithia, may I borrow Jean for a moment?”

“I do not mind, but...” Lithia suspiciously looked over at Cicelnia’s carriage.

“It seems she’s worried that you might buy me off.”

“Hmm, it seems you have your own troubles, Sir Alus. If you ever get sick of her jealousy you are always welcome to come to Rusalca. We will give you a friendly reception.” Having realized the situation, Lithia gave Alus a bewitching smile as she made her offer, and he could only answer with a wry smile.

I guess it can’t be helped, Alus thought, scratching his head. He’d been a little careless. If he brought Jean with him, he would of course come in contact with Cicelnia. If he wanted to maintain fairness then he should speak with him where Lithia could see them as well.

In the end, after some discussion, Lithia gave in, and it was decided that everyone would enter Cicelnia’s carriage to speak.



Unfortunately for Rinne, she was left outside on detection duty to keep anyone from eavesdropping on their conversation. This was also in part because the carriage was designed to carry four at most.

"So, what did you want to talk about, Alus?" Jean asked right off the bat.

"I'll keep it short. Around when did Balmes' large-scale extermination start?"

"I've only heard it secondhand myself so I don't know all the details, but counting from the start of the mission it should have been at least two months."

"It's been that long? Have they really been actively carrying out their operation for that long?"

"... Yeah, thinking about it—it has gone on for pretty long. Well, they've been sending out their precious forces, so maybe they're being very careful."

It wasn't like Alus couldn't understand that. They'd deployed many of their Magicmasters and even the rank No. 9, Duncal, was leading them.

But there was something that bothered him. According to Budna, AWRs and other arms began flowing out of the nation about a month ago. If it was related to Balmes' preparations then it should have been happening before their operation began. It would be unnatural for such quantities to move after the operation had started. It was possible that it had nothing to do with Balmes, but it looked shady.

"Is Gileada taking part too? Do you know?"

"No idea. But that No. 74 was here, so since she wasn't at the conference she's probably taking part."

Trying to put the pieces together, Alus fell into silent contemplation for a moment.

Cicelnia looked like she wanted to say something, as Lithia silently listened in. Just when Alus realized he shouldn't be keeping them here any longer, Rinne lightly knocked on the carriage door.

"Sir Alus, four of the fortress' servants are approaching."

"Got it. Jean, one last thing... are Duncal's abilities worthy of a Single? How would you compare Gileada to Duncal?" Alus had only seen written information on Gileada. If the Single and Double had traded places like Jean said, then Gileada had given up her seat as a Single in less than half a year. Moreover, Alus knew nothing about Duncal.

"Sorry, but I don't know anything about Duncal other than his name. But I don't think there's much difference between him and Ms. Gileada. So I suppose he'd be a little lacking, perhaps two steps behind Galgnis at No. 8. But I would think he's closer to the No. 9 rank."

"I see, got it. Thanks."

After a short pause, Alus said to Lithia, "Lady Lithia, I'm sorry for taking your time."

"I am fine. But was that all?"

"Yes, it's not very interesting, so I'll leave it at this. And if you'll have me, I'll prepare a more sensible topic if I find myself in Rusalca."

Jean stepped out of the carriage first and extended his hand to a smiling Lithia, leaving a frozen Cicelnia behind.

"Things will be busy during the tournament, but once it's over I will send a letter of invitation."

"I'm looking forward to it," Alus said, trying his best to maintain his diplomatic face despite being close to his limit.

Once the two were outside, Rinne came back in and the carriage took off before long.

"You call that private business... I did the right thing to listen in," Cicelnia said.

"It's definitely private business. I have no intention of reporting what I heard from Jean to anyone."

Military matters and the Outer World were entrusted to the Governor-General, so from Cicelnia's position as ruler without any Magicmaster experience, she couldn't fully grasp the meaning behind Alus' and Jean's conversation. Though she could more or less guess the situation from their expressions and tones of voice.

Alus had confirmed whether Duncal and Gileada, Balmes' strongest Magicmasters, were part of the operation. And after getting an answer, his attitude changed a little. The greatest Magicmaster might be suspecting that something abnormal was going on.

Once she had this thought, Cicelnia delved deeper into her speculations. What if something was behind the proposal that Balmes' ruler made during the conference...?

If her assumption was correct, then there must have been something inexplicable going on with Balmes' elimination operation.

Cicelnia suddenly realized something, and brought her face closer to Alus to ask him. She'd gotten rid of the annoying veil after the conference was over and Lithia had exited the carriage. "... Is it true that you are not planning to report this to anyone?"

"Yes."

"... Then that is fine."

She sounded a bit shaky, but she had a bright expression now as if a ray of hope had shone down on her worries.

That was thanks to a change in her point of view. Alus wasn't forcing her to keep an eye on him. Instead, he was showing her that he wasn't going to move to a different nation.

When she realized this, the edges of her lips curled up, and she asked him another question in a better mood. "As for Rusalca... Are you really planning on going to a nation like that?" This was about the invitation that Lithia had mentioned.

"It's a good opportunity, after all. Besides, Alpha's AWR technology is reaching its growth limit, and I've had an interest in Rusalca since before then."

"...!"

Alus wasn't all that against the idea, even if he had to behave like a diplomat during the visit. When it came to AWR technology, he had the curiosity of a passionate scholar.

In reality, most AWRs he worked on were unique, involving a lot of new ideas and inventions. He knew from experience that the technology could be adopted for regular Magicmasters as well, depending on the circumstances. He had stirred up the technological world before, and it had become the foundation for further progress.

For example, the principle behind his permanent mana generation device had been applied to Alpha's streetlights.

In that sense, Alus' research coming to a standstill was one of the underlying causes for Alpha's stagnant magic technology.

Meanwhile, after falling silent for a moment due to Alus' bold answer, Cicelnia wanted to stop him from visiting Rusalca.

However, after everything that had happened and after witnessing his discussion with Jean, she knew that he had made a few concessions, and she was running out of ways to restrain his actions. As a result, the only thing that left her lips were sighs. After looking at Alus once more, she shrugged and unhappily gazed out the carriage window.

Thinking about it, he couldn't be tied down by anyone. He wouldn't permit it. That was the kind of person he was.

If he were to be tied down by any uncomfortable restraints, he might remove them himself and run off somewhere...

The outside scenery flew past. When she realized it, Alus had closed his eyes. Surprisingly enough, despite supposedly being her bodyguard, he was apparently taking a nap before her eyes.





*The Friendship Magical Tournament is beginning, but you are as free-spirited as always... It is just as I heard from Berwick.*

A person who wanted to be free might not be suitable as a Magicmaster. Cicelnia couldn't see him being concerned over his duty and responsibilities as a Magicmaster.

However...

That was why Cicelnia felt something similar in Alus to herself.

Ever since the awards ceremony where they first met, she'd felt that he was a fellow unfortunate soul carrying an inescapable fate.

Hers was a fate due to her royal bloodline. And his was a fate due to his power that made anyone give way...

Cicelnia accepted her fate, spreading her wings to the extent permitted to her while wishing to be able to fly free.

But Alus exceeded the human-set limits that bound Cicelnia, and was held down by the huge chains of fate born as a result of his absolute power.

Yet he continued to struggle against it.

To him, the tiny garden that humanity lived in was far too small.

Cicelnia's anger changed to exasperation as she sighed time and time again. Anyone would lower their head in respect before someone with that beauty and authority. But she felt like Alus would never kneel before her because he himself wished to do so.

*However, there was something this unyielding noble was happy about. Even though he didn't show any interest in me, he went out of his way to let me hear that information, so maybe he feels a little bad about things.*

A more normal Single would be one thing, but Alus probably didn't care about Balmes' situation. At the very least, he wasn't the kind of person to be gripped by a sense of justice and offer to save them. And he had no reason to go out of his way to tell Cicelnia about it.

So Alus had shown enough loyalty to let her hear his discussion, to help alleviate her worry that he would go to another nation. He was bothered about something, and wordlessly conveyed that. It was even possible that it was meant as an apology for the incident at the stairs.

Before she knew it, the grief in her mind had eased considerably.

The carriage continued on, leaving the ups and downs of the conference behind it.

Carrying hope and chaos to a new destination, the carriage moved across the desolate land that featured nothing but a giant white tower looming in the background.

## Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing this book.

By the time this book hits the store shelves, we should be very close to the end of the year. And I would like to extend my deep gratitude to those who picked up this book at such a busy time.

Now then, as 2017 is coming to a close, I experienced an endoscopy for the first time in my life.

I headed over to the hospital to get some stomach medicine prescribed, and one thing led to another and it just kind of ended up happening. And just to be clear, they found nothing.

The nurse told me that endoscopes nowadays are thin enough to go through the nose.

But what she brought out was a tube so thick that I thought it was a tentacle.

“Hey, where are you going to put that thing in again?”

“Your nose. What about it?” (Said with a serious face.)

Well, I’m not humorous enough, so that might be a little exaggerated. It didn’t really go like that, but I experienced something I’m sure to experience more times in the future.

It was about that time that I realized this job will wear down not just my body, but my mind as well.

Once again, hello, Izushiro here.

And I would like to move on to the book itself.

**Spoiler Warning:** Those who read the Afterword first, be warned. Please get Felinella’s approval before continuing. If you don’t, you might find yourself stopped by the dorm’s security system.

Joking aside, how did you like *The Greatest Magicmaster’s Retirement Plan*, Volume 4? As those who read the web version will know, this volume featured amendments and extra episodes to make it extra hefty.

This volume featured the introductions of other Single Digit Magicmasters aside from Alus, as well as the build-up for next volume’s tournament.

Of course, that’s not the main point. The first half of the volume can be described as Tesfia’s feelings and intentions.

She’s the purest and most innocent of the heroines. Overcoming difficulties to fulfill her dreams and ideals, fumbling around to find herself.

Tesfia wants to be honest with her feelings, but because of her awkwardness she ends up running around in circles at times, mustering her courage and walking forward while those around her support her.

While affirming the fetters tying her down due to her noble lineage, she strives for a different future. That’s what makes her Tesfia, and at the same time I believe that’s what makes her an attractive heroine.

I hope that you can continue to cheer for her in the future as well.

... Though I guess saying anything further would be spoiling too much. For the details please read the volume itself.

This series has already reached four volumes. In this volume, the world within the barrier expands as the story begins to develop.

Then there's the large number of new characters...

I hope to get the next volume out quicker, so I await you in that Afterword as well.

I would like to give thanks to everyone who's endeavored to bring out this series.

Thank you very much to Miyuki Ruria-sama for your illustrations despite your tight schedule. There were a lot of new faces this time around, and they've all been drawn beautifully and I am very grateful for it.

Among them, Cicelnia and Rinne honestly exceeded my expectations and you've breathed life into them. It's kind of making me want to give them preferential treatment... I look forward to your work in the next volume too.

Moving on, I would like to throw in an apology to my editor-in-charge, T-sama. In reality the volume was meant to be a little—well—much thinner. I'll try my best to keep it shorter for next time! I'd also like to thank the designers, printers and everyone else involved in the making of this volume.

Finally, I'd like to thank all of the readers. I hope to enjoy your continued patronage.

While I'm at it, I'd like to make a request. As this volume goes on sale, there is a heroine popularity poll. The heroines in this poll are Loki, Tesfia, Alice and Felinella.

On top of that, there are also individual heroine side stories available on HF's official site, yomeru-hj.net, so please feel free to read them.

Moreover, the poll will be open until December 15. I will of course take the results into consideration for future developments, and it might even affect a portion of the marketing campaign for volume 5. Of course, it all depends on the poll...

So please consider voting as well. No, really. Please do.

As for how, please check Hobby Japan's official Twitter (@Hjbunko), the official blog, or the homepage.

I haven't really had an Afterword this long before, so what to write... there's some behind the scenes things like how Loki came about, but I suppose that won't work considering the space remaining.

So how about a little on the next volume... The fifth volume should be a big turning point both story-wise and character-wise, and I'll do my best to make sure it will be in your hands by next spring. So please continue supporting me.

—Izushiro







Alus ran forward with the occasional feint thrown in, at a blistering speed that a normal person would be unable to even see, his arms trailing behind him.

Selva released the hands held behind his back, and thrust one hand forward, skillfully manipulating the mana threads.







 **Selva Greenus**

The elderly butler serving the Fable family. His manners are elegant and he always carries himself as a gentleman. But what of his hidden face of the past...?

 **Rinne Kimmel**

An excellent detection Magi-master who always has a calm expression. She is Cicelnia's aide and possesses the Eye of Providence.

 **Frose Fable**

The head of the Fable family and a former top-ranking military official. She is very strict with her daughter Tesfia to protect the family's social standing.

 **Cicelnia il Arlzeit**

Alpha's ruler and queen. She is proud, smart, and an unrivaled beauty. She is ambitious and selfish, but also has a feminine and delicate side to her.

 **Tesfia Fable**

A novice Magi-master, secretly receiving guidance from Alus at the Institute. She is a very competitive girl, but is troubled over her relationship with her mother.

 **Alus Reigin**

The story's protagonist. The current ranked No. 1. The world's greatest genius Magi-master. For reasons of his own, he's enjoying life as a student while carrying out all kinds of missions behind the scenes.







"You  
did too...  
right?"

"... Yes."

"Then let us  
go shower  
together."

# Bonus Short Stories

## Those Who Have It, Those Who Don't

Today was the one day of the year where girls in the middle of their growth periods spent the hours in hope and unease. At the very top floor of the Institute, which had been locked up tight, the female students were being measured. All of the staircases were blocked off with tape reading 'No Entry,' and teachers kept a watchful eye nearby.

Among the girls was a redhead who didn't seem all that enthusiastic, since she let out a depressed sigh. Having finally resolved herself, the girl, Tesfia, in her underwear, stepped onto the scale. It took less than one second to get the result, so bracing herself was pretty much pointless. In the next moment, the scale cold-heartedly chucked out a number at her.

The silver-haired girl who came after her wrapped up her weighing while Tesfia groaned. There were measurements in this day and age where being small had its advantages.

"Ahh, you really are light, Loki."

"W-What are you doing all of a sudden? You're not as heavy as I thought you would be, Ms. Tesfia."

It came as a shock to the person herself, but Tesfia's weight was just barely excusable. Considering the training she was going through every day though, she'd be forgiven for thinking that she would have lost more weight.

*All that midnight snacking must have gotten to me.*

Tesfia's shoulders slumped.

The next measurement was height. Tesfia had made use of the dirty method of tying her hair up, but it was easily seen through by the teacher.

She tried raising her chin in a bit of token resistance. However, that only prompted the teacher to push down on the measuring stick even harder.

"Ack!"

With tears in her eyes, Tesfia painfully held onto her head and made way for Loki. That said, this measurement was a hurdle for her. Before coming to the Institute she really hadn't cared, but now she seemed bothered by her growth being slower than the other girls around her. She didn't let it show around Alus, but she secretly hoped for improvement.

Loki politely stepped up to the measuring stick, but everyone in the room could see that she was standing on her toes. Of course, there was no way that would fly, and before long she fell prey to the cruel and accurate measuring system.

"T-This is just too much... Teacher, this must be broken!" Loki grumbled, then sighed as she looked at her result. Her only saving grace was that she was a year younger than Tesfia and Alice.

"That's right, we still have room to grow," a voice sharing her hopes said. Said voice belonged to Tesfia, and Loki found herself nodding in agreement. However, the two had one last hurdle: the chest measurement.

"Are you ready, Loki?"

"Of course. I don't think I can take much more, so let's wrap it up quick."

The two entered the partitioned-off measuring rooms where female teachers awaited them, each having a bad feeling about what was to come. The next moment—

"Ms. Fable, sorry, but no matter how much you beg, as a teacher I can't do that! I have a duty to measure everyone equally!! It's not going to happen, okay?"

Loki could hear the results of Tesfia's attempted shady dealings from the measuring room next to hers. "What is she even doing?" Loki murmured, despite being in a similar situation. To be honest, she wasn't willing to go that low, and she didn't want to be associated with such tactics either.

"Ms. Loki... Uhm, why don't we start by removing those pads?" the teacher said with pity in her voice.

Loki was so dumbfounded that the serious teacher almost considered letting her cheat. When she came out of the measuring room, Loki looked even more dispirited than Tesfia, like her soul had left her body. With their shoulders slumped, they turned their pent-up frustrations onto another girl who came out of her measuring room a moment after them. With bloodshot eyes, they scanned their eyes from her feet upwards until they stopped at a certain point.

"W-What is it?" The girl's shoulders trembled at the stares of the two wild beasts as she timidly spoke.

"Alice... I was wondering why I didn't see you anywhere."

"U-Uhm, that's because you'd definitely take your anger out on me. I was trying to be considerate!"

Tesfia and Loki stormed up to Alice, who looked like she might cry at any moment, and confiscated her license at a blinding speed, intently reading the measurements recorded on it.

"You're growing taller, and your weight is average..."

"T-That's not true, I put on some weight too?" Alice faltered a little, looking awkward and trying to placate the two with her other less-than-optimal measurements, hoping they they'd call it even after seeing a certain envy-invoking value—but her attempts at playing victim were seen through immediately.

"Moving on to the chest measurement... W-We're eating the same things, so why... All that extra weight just went over there... Why does all the fat go to my stomach, but to your chest? ...This is unfair!"

A gloomy shadow fell on Tesfia's face. Loki read Alice's chest measurement, and realized that it was a pipe dream for her. She directed a hollow stare Alice's way.



"That's why I didn't want to show it! I'm actually really envious of you two, too! Fia is slender, and Loki dear is small and cute... I would be fine with not being so big!"

"Alice..."

"Ms. Alice."

The three exchanged looks after Alice's desperate plea. They formed a combined front and returned to the measuring rooms together.

"Please split this chest measurement in three!" they all said.

The three girls thrust out their licenses to the female teacher, demanding their measurements be changed.

"As if I could!"

But their demand was immediately shot down. And it need not be said that they were then given a stern lecture.

## **The Beginning of Everything for the Young Girl**

The girl earnestly trained herself to become stronger for the sake of revenge. In the human world, killing Fiends was seen as a wonderful way of contributing to humanity, but to the young girl Loki Leevahl, that didn't matter. Only the flames of hatred for the Fiends that had killed her parents burned within her, moving her forward. Indeed, if nothing had changed, she would have been forever driven by her hate.

With no relatives to speak of, Loki was conscripted at the age of eight. Joining the Magicmaster training program, she grew stronger despite her tiny frame. She was confident that she was the strongest in her age group. Unrivalled in close combat, before long there was no one her age to spar with. Her training had been nothing but painful when she began; she could now easily accomplish it without any struggle on a daily basis. And the days when she was covered in cuts and bruises were long behind her.

Two years was enough to change someone, and Loki was no exception. The number of her classmates had dropped considerably, not that she'd bothered to remember their names anyway.

But the biggest change of all happened within Loki. The flames of revenge had begun to die out, leaving only a smoldering hate that would never start a large fire now. Loki was convinced of that. The only thing she thought of now was to one day say farewell to her parents peacefully resting in the Outer World. She believed that the day would come when she would visit her parents' final resting place. In order to confirm the truth, to put her feelings into words, Loki would have no choice but to see it.

Though she held on to that dream, she had already learned all of the techniques and knowledge she needed in her training. Around the time she started feeling like she was getting nowhere, a young boy appeared before her. By this time, she was really restless. Lately, her sparring partners consisted mostly of adults, and while she might not always come out victorious, she wasn't one-sidedly losing. Yet...

*He's fast! Do I block it? No, then I won't be able to handle the following attack...!* She instantly decided how to handle the fist flying her way, just barely dodging it.

Loki was sweating bullets as she turned to attacking. This was a regular mock battle. The only difference was that she was going up against a young boy she'd just met. The unfamiliar black-haired boy looked weak. To Loki, who was strong enough to fight adults, it felt like a waste of time. There was no major difference in their builds, and the only strange thing was that she hadn't seen him around before. She was sure that the result would be the same regardless, and she faced him full of confidence. However, she very quickly stopped underestimating him.

She couldn't find any openings in his refined martial arts, and if anything he was accurately hitting her openings. His precise and merciless attacks were almost mechanical. In contrast to Loki, who was going all out, the boy wasn't sweating in the slightest as he cornered her in short order. It wasn't a matter of power or the number of moves available to them, this was purely Loki losing in terms of technique. She had pride in what she had developed through her harsh training over the years.

The dull sound of fist and arm colliding rang out, but eventually Loki changed up her method from blocking the boy's fist to brushing it off. But that was proof that she was unable to withstand the fierce attacks. His fluid strikes showed no sign of stopping. Even now, a right backhand was coming at her.

The attacks were moving so fast that she couldn't follow them with her eyes. Seeing signs of his attack coming, she raised her right hand to block it. The next moment, a prickling pain assaulted her as she felt the impact of the blow.

Loki was on the defensive, and in an attempt to counterattack, she poured some strength into her right fist. However, she never got the chance to swing it.

*He took the initiative again!*

She'd blocked his attack, but the next one was already on the way in the form of a kick aimed at her flank.

Loki was in no position to dodge it, so she put her arms down and lowered her posture. Her body stiffened as she braced for impact—which was when his leg came to a halt and headed towards the floor instead.

"Ah?!"

It was a feint. The boy used the momentum from the kick to swing his backhand in the opposite direction.

Loki lowered her head by reflex and the sharp fist grazed the back of her neck. The sudden dodge seemed exceedingly successful as the young boy's posture was completely thrown off balance. She couldn't use this against adults, but the boy's build wasn't much different from hers. So she chased after the arm that had passed above her neck to grab hold of it and lock him down.

With a fluid motion, she got on top of the boy and constricted his arm. She put all of her weight on his arm to throw him to the ground. And yet... instead he tugged at his arm, bending his body by himself, forcibly changing his posture. By the time she realized that, Loki was upside down. The arm she'd clung onto had now grabbed hold of her collar. She expected that she'd be slammed headfirst into the floor, but instead...

Just before she was about to slam against the floor, the boy followed up with a kick. Despite guarding against it with her arms crossed, she still flew across the floor. Fortunately, the floor and walls were padded, so she wasn't particularly hurt. That said... she blankly stared up at him from her collapsed state.

*I don't stand a chance.*

It was a crushing defeat. She was not given a single opening she could exploit. That was just how big the gap in strength was between her and the boy around her age. Even she had to admit the difference between them. Loki had fully lost, but she still gazed at the boy. At the guidepost for her future training.

Seeing her like that, the boy interpreted it as her accepting her loss and left without saying a word.

From that day on, he would stand in Loki's way as she endeavored in her training, with him as her goal... and she would continue to lose to him. She put her all in her training so that she could one day overcome the boy whose name she didn't even know. And before she knew it, the boy's back had become a major driving force for her.

That didn't change even after becoming his partner later on. Nor had she slacked on any effort to get closer to him. She continued chasing that back that grew ever larger. Until the day she could repay her debt, she simply longed to stay at his side.

## **Two Caged Birds**

The center of authority in Alpha, the youthful ruler, was currently in her room and swamped with official work. Her gorgeous clothing only served to accentuate her attractiveness. Sitting at her desk, Cicelnia rubbed her shoulders as she looked down at the vast number of documents. The Arlzeit family had long resided in the royal palace, which also served to house the nation's political body. However, it didn't serve as a residence for the many politicians, but rather as their offices.

The ruler currently had her black hair in two braids, looking like she was set for work. If she felt like it, she could go through days of work in just a few hours. But instead, she let out her umpteenth sigh as she glared at the documents with a sour face.

Seeing Cicelnia struggling to get through her work—which was rare—the maid Rinne Kimmel's face twitched. She'd only just returned from an errand, but... Cicelnia wasn't in a good mood. That said... this happened every year.

"This will not do, the hole will get too deep," Cicelnia said, as she stamped the proposal to be reexamined and put it on the pile of rejected documents. After a while she shifted her gaze over to Rinne.

"So will it be Ms. Lettie this year again?" The ruler cut straight to the chase, and anyone who couldn't guess what she was asking would be a failure of an attendant. Rinne had been tasked with selecting a Magicmaster for the annual rulers conference. Summons being sent out to Alpha's Singles was only natural, as a part of this yearly custom. As a demonstration of national strength, the Magicmaster accompanying the ruler had to be at the top. Ever since Cicelnia became the ruler, the Magicmaster accompanying her had always been Lettie Kultunca... However...

"I... I am very sorry." Rinne quickly lowered her head. "Lady Lettie is in the middle of a mission in the Outer World and won't be available for the conference."

"...And?"

The smile that came in return made Rinne stumble for words. Not having anyone accompanying her for the conference was completely out of the question.

"I have called out to some of the Doubles, and..."

"No thank you. Are you trying to embarrass me, Rinne?"

"Of course not... But in that case, then..."

Rinne cast her eyes down as she recalled the only remaining choice. Alpha's other Single.

"Bring Alus with you no matter what. Or I will not attend the conference."

"Please don't be unreasonable. I have called out to Sir Alus every year, but he has always immediately refused."

Rinne honestly didn't see the point in going at all. Alus was ranked No. 1, and he had absolutely no interest in politics. A Single Digit's duties or responsibilities wouldn't move him. He could even refuse the ruler's summons. That was just how valuable the ranked No. 1 was.

The reason Cicelnia had so much influence among the seven rulers was because Alpha 'possessed' the greatest Magicmaster. Cicelnia probably wouldn't go so far as to not attend at all, but it would be unsightly for the ruler of Alpha, the nation that had achieved the most, to attend the conference without a Single. Rinne could feel a major headache coming on as she readied herself for Cicelnia's response.

"Rinne... Alpha has two Magicmasters. If Ms. Lettie is not available, then what else to do but to ask the other?"

She raised a finger and said it like it was obvious. But if she could do that, Rinne wouldn't have struggled so much.

"That's true. But..."

"So I am counting on you, Rinne."

At times like these, Cicelnia's lips would always be curled up into the form of a crescent moon. Rinne wanted to follow her master's orders by all

means possible, but she couldn't help but resent herself for not being able to refuse her master's flirtatious behavior. But either way, she had to bring Alus back with her.

"I understand... So do you know where Sir Alus is now, Lady Cicelnia?"

"At the Institute, according to the Governor-General," she told Rinne with an amused expression.

"At the Institute? But... why? Did Sir Alus accept a position as a lecturer or instructor? I was sure he would be with the military or in the Outer World."

"Apparently, that isn't it. He 'enrolled' at the Institute."

"—!! That is rather eccentric... I can't understand how Singles think."

"Amusing, is it not? I wonder what expression he goes through Institute life with. But... I suppose it will not continue for long. Alus is the same as me."

"He is?"

Rinne had a perplexed look, wondering how they resembled each other. The ruler of a nation and the top of the Magicmasters. They were both certainly busy people with many expectations placed upon them. She pondered for a second if Cicelnia was thinking of those kinds of duties or responsibilities. However—Cicelnia's eyes narrowed as a thin smile formed on her face.

"We are both trapped in small cages." She tapped her desk with a finger as she spoke. "Though we may have splendid wings, we are not allowed to fly outside. We are told to be happy we have wings in the first place, as extravagant collars are put on us."

Rinne stared at that lonely looking smile on Cicelnia's face. She didn't think that she'd be able to understand all the feelings behind it. But she felt like she knew what kind of person Alus was. She couldn't help but feel that they just weren't similar.

Rinne believed that Cicelnia had torn off her own wings, resolved to remain in her cage to the end. Meanwhile, Alus continued to struggle and resist even within the cage. That's why, while he contributed to the nation, he had no interest in anything other than what he himself wanted and wouldn't obey anyone.

Because his eyes were fixated on the real blue sky, in the real world.

## **For My Young Daughter**

In a corner of the Fable family estate, a happy sight could be seen on the lawn. Two chairs were placed at a small, fancy, round table under the shade of a tree. Around it were colorful flowers in full bloom.

"It's been so long since we've been together, Mother!" a young girl excitedly said with a big smile.

"Yes, I hurried home for your sake, Fia. I'm sorry we can't always be together."

Sitting across from the girl, Tesfia's mother Frose smiled back at her.

Her work in the military was busy, and she only got the chance to come home a few times a month. The handling of the mansion was left to her butler, Selva, and the maids were raising her child. This mother and daughter had very little time together, but Frose did what she could to come home as often as possible.

As she looked at her smiling daughter, she told Selva, "Thank you for your hard work," showing her appreciation for the butler.

However, he simply smiled and replied, "It was nothing," lowering his head.

This happy sight was something that all the servants of the Fable family hoped for. Everyone who worked here knew just how excited Tesfia became whenever her mother came home. No matter how hard they might try, they could never be her mother. So whenever there was a family outing like this, Tesfia's smile spread throughout the entire mansion. And when that happened, the cook put his skills to the test and made more sweets than the two could finish. Just now, an entire cake platter was brought out and placed on the table.

Tesfia's eyes sparkled and preparations for teatime began.

"Uhm, Selva, I want that."

"Very well."

Tesfia recklessly leaned over the table and embarrassingly pointed at one of the cakes with her small finger. With a smile on his lips, Selva calmly moved the cake to a small plate. And before long, he had also served up sweetened tea to go with it. Upon receiving it, Tesfia looked over at Frose.

"Go ahead and eat, Fia. But watch out that you don't eat too much."

Tesfia nodded at her kind words and cut up the cake, focusing her entire being on it as she brought a piece to her mouth.

"And Master Frose?"

"I will be fine with just tea," Frose responded to Selva's question. Just gazing at her daughter feasting on the cake was enough to make her feel full.

However, Selva looked troubled. "The head chef said that he'd put all of his effort into making these, and was very proud of them..."

"Urgh..."

Frose's cup froze in the middle of being brought to her lips, and she looked at Selva with a vague smile. She couldn't help but feel guilty knowing the head chef took pride in his work. However, every time she came home there were more new sweets on the menu, and he always made more than she could eat. In fact, the head chef seemed to be more focused on being a patissier than a cook. Incidentally, the leftover sweets were given to the mansion's servants.

"Then I suppose I'll take one."

"Understood. I'm sure the head chef will be happy to hear that."

Frose felt like Selva had manipulated her, but quite a bit of effort had been put into the sweets. Besides, she was with Tesfia. As her mother, she

could at least share a slice or two with her daughter. She felt like she'd read something about how that was what being a family was all about in a book, and she too carried a piece of cake to her mouth.

Perhaps because she left the child rearing to the maids, or because she'd been in the military for too long... or maybe it was because of her own lonely childhood, Frose still struggled to understand familial bonds. That's why in talking with her daughter, she almost felt like a stranger working from a manual.

However, her feelings of wanting to spend more time with her daughter whenever she came home were only growing stronger with time. Having spent all these years working, Frose was determined to make this current job her last. So she only had to endure a little more...

"Incidentally, young miss, we also have something like this today," Selva said, presenting Tesfia with neatly arranged, but otherwise ugly-looking cakes... These were Frose's first attempts at making sweets, and even though she followed the instructions to a T, the finished product looked completely different. Only the fragrance was similar to what she'd been trying to make, though the smell of burnt baked goods was still mixed in with it...

Selva had neatly arranged these failures in a small basket. Tesfia's small hand reached out for them, ignoring Frose's objections, and she unhesitatingly put one in her mouth.

"Fia, spit that out! It's bad for you!"

Tesfia chewed on it a couple of times, but still couldn't swallow it. Yet she shook her head at her mother's words.

She desperately tried to hide her expression from showing as she washed it down with the tea. "You made this, right, Mother? It's really good," she happily said. There were some tears in her eyes, but she was otherwise fine.

Frose patted her chest in relief as she resolved to learn from the head chef. And the butler who'd gone out of his way to put his nose in other people's business would also receive a grumbling lecture.

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by Izushiro

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